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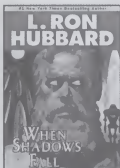
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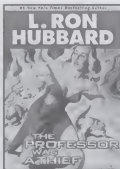
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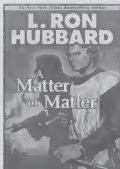
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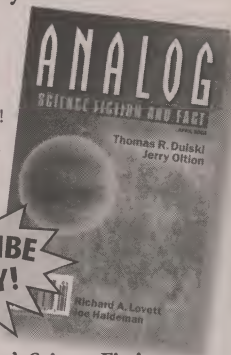
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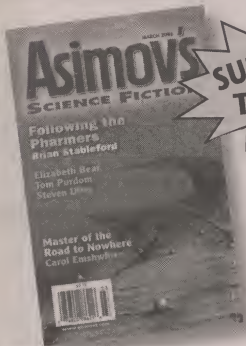
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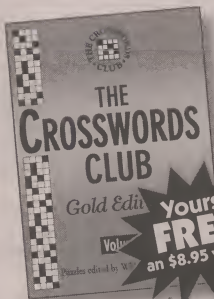
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## WHAT'S IN A TITLE?

Early one morning while making breakfast for my children and listening to the radio with only part of my attention, I overheard a reference to a now-defunct corporation called Genetics Savings and Clone. The subject of cloning could, of course, provide material for future editorials, but what struck me about the sound bite was how unappealing I found the name of the company. It reminded me of some of the titles I've seen attached to story submissions that haven't worked for me and that got me thinking about the value of the title of a story.

The title is usually our first introduction to a story. It is highly unlikely that a title will be a deal breaker—I don't think I've ever rejected a story because of its title—but there are titles that have intrigued me and enticed me into a tale. Lawrence Watt-Evan's classic "Why I Left Harry's All-Night Hamburgers" is one of my favorite examples of this sort. Often the most memorable titles don't achieve their full resonance until after I've read the stories they come attached to: Daniel Keyes's "Flowers for Algernon," Connie Willis's "A Letter from the Clearys," James Patrick Kelly's "Plus or Minus," Alice Sola Kim's "The Other Graces."

Authors use many different criteria for settling on a tale's title. A few sources of inspiration include a character from the story, Octavia Butler's "Bloodchild"; an action that occurs in the tale, Isaac Asimov's "Nightfall"; a place, Arthur Clarke's "The Star"; or a snippet of poetry, Robert Silverberg's "Sailing to Byzantium." Many titles combine two or more of these elements. Jim Kelly offers the following advice about titles to writers: "Often as not, the title you want is somewhere in your piece, whether it's fiction or non-fiction. It doesn't necessarily have to be your cleverest turn of phrase, but it

should point toward the heart of what you have to say."

While pointing to the heart of the story it is equally important that the title not give away too much about the tale. This is not a problem that I tend to run into in stories by professional writers, but it can crop up in tales by beginners. It's generally not a good idea to telegraph too strongly that the main character is going to meet a bad end or that the story was inspired by a science fiction cliché. Of course, the most adroit hands can make mincemeat of this advice. A couple of years ago, the title of a lovely story by Mike Resnick had completely slipped out of my brain the minute I'd started on the first paragraph. About two thirds of the way into the story, I suddenly realized that there could only be one possible title for the tale. A quick check back to the first page informed me that yes, it was indeed called "The Bride of Frankenstein"—a bit of a sleight of hand and an ever so witty name for a story that ended up on the Hugo ballot.

I find the moment when a great title suddenly makes sense to be an intellectually pleasing one. It's a little bit like figuring out the theme in a crossword puzzle. One of my all-time favorite titles is Daryl Gregory's "Second Person, Present Tense." I'd always wondered about which point in the creative process of constructing the tale did that title occur. I recently put the question to Daryl and I wasn't surprised by the answer:

Most titles I have to struggle to find, but this one—appropriately enough—was a gift from the unconscious. I was looking for a story idea, reading articles and books about theories of consciousness, when I realized I could write about the second

personality to inhabit a body. The title immediately popped into my brain. (From where? Some other part of Daryl. Or an alternate Daryl. My Darallel.) So, the title was there before I wrote a sentence, and survived intact until I sent it off. The section of the story actually written in second person present tense was included because the title demanded it.

Sometimes an author really has to struggle to come up with a title. Rather than thinking of it before they ever sit down at the computer to write the story or happening upon it somewhere in the middle, they have to sit back when the story is done and figure out what turn of phrase will best represent exactly what they wanted to say. On rare occasions, an author will request permission to change the title even after they've sold the story to the magazine. I've asked a few authors to change titles that didn't work for me, but I'm not like some of the old-time editors who seemed to enjoy slapping their own titles onto the works that they published. It's not always easy to come up with titles for my own editorials and I find it even harder to come up with a new title for someone else's work.

I don't always unlock all the secrets of the best titles until long after I've read the stories. Sometimes I'll come upon a line in a poem or a play and discover that the title of a story I read years earlier has a meaning on another meta level. It's the realization that our shared culture holds clues to the direction the story will take. We don't really want to have that direction spelled out before we read the tale. Indeed, much of the joy of reading is figuring out those connections ourselves. Just like a good mystery novelist, an SF writer may misdirect us, but we get a triumphant feeling the moment when we suddenly realize that the key to the heart of the story—whether it came from literature, wordplay (as long as it's not an awful pun), or Strunk & White—was right there on the first page. ○

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## THE FANTASTIC VOYAGES OF SIR JOHN MANDEVILLE

**L** Sprague de Camp, who wrote so many great novels of fantasy and science fiction in the middle years of the twentieth century, liked to refer to fiction writers as "professional liars." I've also heard the term applied to lawyers, politicians, public-relations people, and various other practitioners of the verbal arts.

I don't like it. There are a lot of lawyers and politicians whose statements I mistrust, and I rarely accept PR statements at face value, but it seems too cavalier to dismiss all practitioners of those professions as liars. (Honest Abe Lincoln was both a lawyer *and* a politician.) And I absolutely reject the glib labeling of the writing of fiction as a kind of lying. Fiction writers—and trust me on this; I have been one for almost sixty years—do indeed make up stories, and hope that their readers will believe them at least while engaged in the act of reading. But no one past the age of seven thinks that Dante actually took a tour of the nine circles of Hell, or that Hamlet really encountered his murdered father's ghost on the battlements of the castle, or—to come closer to our own genre—that Cthulhu slumbers in his undersea palace, dreaming of the moment when he and the other Elder Gods will emerge and reconquer our world. Those stories have a certain kind of *fictional* truth, but their writers did not expect readers to regard them as literal reports about the real world.

The phrase "professional liar," I think, ought to be reserved for swindlers, financial manipulators, and the creators of hoaxes. That last category includes such diabolically ingenious people as John Keely, who bilked nineteenth-century investors out of hundreds of thousands of dollars by claiming to have invented a perpetual motion machine, and Richard

Adams Locke, who convinced credulous readers of the New York *Sun* in 1835 that Sir John Herschel's powerful new telescope had revealed the existence of forests, oceans, and all sorts of strange animals on the Moon.

And then there was the fourteenth-century author of *The Travels and Voyages of Sir John Mandeville*, who, at a time when Europeans had very little knowledge of the world beyond their immediate vicinity, produced a lively and readable tale of his travels through far-off and fantastic regions full of the most amazing marvels and wonders. In a later era, he would have been a successful fantasy writer; in his own, he was regarded as an authority on our planet's geography, and as late as the seventeenth century Samuel Purchas, who compiled a vast compendium of explorers' journals, called him "the greatest Asian traveler that ever the world had," which certainly he was not, though he does rank high in the roster of charlatans.

The prologue to Mandeville's *Travels* says that he was born in the English town of St. Albans and set out to explore the world in 1332 (or 1322, according to some manuscripts), "and since hitherto [I] have been a long time over the sea, and have seen and gone through many kingdoms, lands and provinces and isles, and have passed through Turkey, Armenia the less and the more, Tartary, Persia, Syria. . . ." and on and on to India and "Amazonia," where he beheld "many diverse manners of folk of diverse laws and shapes," and many a land even stranger and more distant.

The part about having come from St. Albans may even have been true. A certain Jean de Bourgogne of the Belgian city of Liege seems to have confessed on his deathbed in 1372 that he was actually "Master Jean de Mandeville, Knight,



count of Montfort in England. . . . Having had the misfortune to kill, in his country, a count whom he did not name, he obliged himself to traverse the three parts of the world. . . . Although he was a man of distinguished nobility he preferred to keep himself hidden," practicing medicine and writing an account of his travels. We have no way of telling if this is true. The oldest surviving manuscript of the book is in French heavily flavored with Anglicisms. Malcolm Letts, the foremost modern Mandeville scholar, has concluded that the book was almost certainly written by an Englishman, and "the more the problem is studied the clearer it becomes, at least to my mind, that Mandeville was a man of flesh and blood, born, as he says, at St. Albans, that he practiced medicine, . . . that he fled the country, and that de Bourgogne was a name invented or borrowed by Mandeville to conceal his identity."

More than that we will probably never know. But his book is a wild and wonderful thing, very much worth reading by the connoisseur of good fantasy or good hoaxes.

Mandeville seems to have based his account of his purported travels on the narratives of such earlier medieval travelers as Friar Odoric of Pordenone, John de Plano Carpini, and William of Rubruck, who made valiant journeys to India, China, and Indonesia in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries with the intent of spreading Christianity. But whatever he lifted he embellished with magnificent fantasies of his own invention.

Thus he inserts into a discussion of the tomb of St. John at Ephesus the tale of a princess who was transformed into a dragon; in Jaffa he sees the "bones of a giant that hight Andromedes, and one of his ribs is forty feet long"; he informs us that the Pyramids were "the barns of Joseph that were made for to keep corn in for the seven barren years . . . as the first book of Bible tells." But much better is coming as he presses on to the Near East and then Africa. Such as the Fountain of Youth, which flows out of Paradise. He

took three sips of it, "and evermore since that time I feel me much the better and the wholer." The land of the Amazons, which he places in what is now Iraq: "in that realm is all women and no man, because that the women will not suffer no men among them." To the south he finds Ethiopia, where the sun is so strong that "in the sea of Libya is no fish, for the water is evermore boiling for the great heat." In that land "are young children white-haired, and when they are old, their hair waxes black." In the city of Saba diamonds abound, which "grow together male and female, and they are nourished with dew of heaven. And they engender and conceive, and bring forth small children, and multiply and grow all the year." Deeper yet into Africa "be folk that have but one foot and they go so blue that it is marvelous. And the foot is so large that it shadoweth all the body against the sun when they would lie and rest them."

Onward: "In a certain isle towards the south dwell folk of foul stature and of cursed kind that have no heads, and their eyes be in their shoulders. And their mouth crooked as an horse shoe, and that is in the midst of their breast. And in another isle be folk that have the face all flat, all plain without nose and without mouth, but they have two small holes all round instead of their eyes, and their mouth is flat also without lips. And in another isle be folk that have the lip above the mouth so great that when they sleep in the sun, they cover all the face with that lip to shade themselves." He continues his parade of human monsters with people with ears hanging down to their knees; people with horses' feet, who run so swiftly they overtake wild beasts; hermaphrodites, who alternately sire and bear children; eight-toed people who crawl wondrous fast on their knees, and a race that had heads like those of dogs, "yet they are full reasonable and subtle of wit," and many another remarkable tribe. In India are eels thirty feet long, "and folk that dwell near that water are ill colored, yellow and green." In Cathay—China—he enrolls in the Great Khan's army and

spends fifteen months doing battle in the Mongol conquest of southern China, a campaign that had taken place twenty or thirty years before he was born, though probably he assumed his readers knew nothing about that. As for the Khan, he says, "he passeth all earthly princes in might, noblesse, royalty, and riches."

When he leaves China he visits the court of a monarch nearly as great, the fabled Christian king Prester John, about whom a whole cluster of remarkable tales accreted. (I wrote a long book about Prester John years ago; there is no room to tell that story here.) Prester John rules seventy-two provinces, each with a king of its own who is under subjection to him. In the sea adjacent to his country are "great rocks of the stone that is called adamant, the which of its own kind draws to him iron; and for these should pass no ships that had nails of iron," because the magnetism pulls them forth. Prester John's country also has "a great sea all of gravel and sand, and no drop of water therein, that ebbs and flows as the great sea does in other countries," a river "full of precious stones, and no drop of water," a place where men have horns and have no language, but grunt like pigs, another where birds are capable of human speech, and one where trees sprout at sunrise and "grow till midday, bearing fruit, but no man dare take of that fruit, for it is a thing of faerie. And after midday they decrease and enter into the earth, so at the going down of the sun they appear no more."

Mandeville finds an isle of giant naked cannibals, thirty feet high, and beyond it an isle of cannibals *sixty* feet high, and one where maidens kept venomous serpents in their vaginas to defend their chastity, and one nearby where women

have the power to slay men with an angry look, and beyond that one where women mourn when their children are born and rejoice when they die. He sees the spotted "gyrfaunt," which seems to be a giraffe, "and his neck is twenty cubits long," and the fierce "cocodril" (crocodile), which has no tongue, and snails so big that three or four men could live within their shells, and he visits the isle of Pytan, "where the folk neither till nor sow no land, and are nourished by the scent of wild apples." Beyond, past a wilderness of dragons and unicorns and lions and elephants both white and blue, lies "Taprobane"—Ceylon—where ants the size of hounds dig gold from the ground, and beyond that is Thule, "the furthest isle of the world inhabited with men," beyond which is nothing but a wilderness filled with "dragons and other wild beasts, cruel and fell." Here he ended his journey.

It is a fabulous tale in more senses than one. One wild story tumbles over another for two hundred spellbinding pages. For centuries it was accepted as gospel, until more trustworthy explorers ventured into those parts three centuries later and, more's the pity, were unable to find Mandeville's marvels. Shakespeare had read the book; he refers to Prester John and the Great Khan in *Much Ado About Nothing*, and has Othello speak "of the Cannibals that each other eat . . . and men whose heads do grow beneath their shoulders." I have only begun to touch on its wonders here. But anyone who loves a good fantasy will find rich rewards in Sir John Mandeville's book of travels, which has captivated audiences for five hundred years. A very good modern edition of it can be found in the Penguin Classics series, translated by C.W.R.D. Mosely. I recommend it most heartily. ○

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Chris Beckett resides in Cambridge, United Kingdom, with his wife Maggie, two dogs, and a cat. His three grown-up children now live away from home, one of them currently in Malawi. The author's short story collection *The Turing Test*, published by Elastic Press and still in print, won the Edge Hill Short Fiction Award in 2009. His new novel *Dark Eden*, which takes up the story of the Asimov's tale of the same name (March 2006), is coming out from Corvus this summer. Chris's dark and unsettling new tale may make us all rue . . .

# DAY 29

Chris Beckett

"Nearly Day 40!" exclaimed the Station Leader, heading for the cheap plastic armchairs she used for informal chats. "Well, well. It hardly seems yesterday that you first joined us."

Stephen did his best to ignore the farting sound that the chairs made as they seated themselves. It troubled him that she didn't care about this affront to her dignity, but she probably thought such considerations beneath her. She was an Agency officer of the old school.

"And then pastures new for you," Leader Wilson went on. "We'll soon all be nothing but a distant memory."

Stephen leaned forward. His large, pink, painfully open face reddened, as it always did when he was the slightest bit angry or agitated or ashamed.

"Yes, my Day 40 is just two weeks away, but I was wondering if it would possible for me to continue working after that? To be honest I'd prefer to work right through to Day 1. It just seems silly to sit and twiddle my thumbs for forty days before my departure when I could be making myself useful."

Leader Wilson laughed.

"God knows there's more than enough to do, Stephen. But I can't take up your offer. It's a very strict Agency rule, as you know. No one is allowed to work in the forty day countdown to transmission."

"It's a bloody stupid rule," Stephen snapped, his face now very red indeed, his scalp smoldering round the roots of his spiky yellow hair. "Surely it's obvious that transmission couldn't possibly act retrospectively to affect the quality of work done before the event."

"Of course not." Leader Wilson was perceptibly irritated. "But that isn't the issue, as you must know as well as I do. It's about your accountability for your actions. Suppose you were to make a serious error of judgment. How could you be called to account for it, if you had absolutely no memory whatsoever of your decision-making process?"

"But I'm a data analyst, for Christ's sake!" Stephen burst out. "I process *numbers*! All my work is routinely checked, and none of it involves any direct contact with

colonists. There really is no one I could possibly hurt or offend in those forty days, and therefore no chance whatsoever that I will compromise the Agency."

His boss shrugged.

"I admit the rule does seem a little overzealous for non-operational staff like yourself, though you're the first one who's ever actually complained about having to take a five-week vacation. But a rule is a rule, Stephen, and I don't have the right to change it, or even the inclination to try, not least because your fellow-analysts would howl with rage if I did. I'm afraid you're just going to have to stop work on Day 40 and resign yourself to having fun for those last few weeks before you go, however onerous that may be for you."

She stood up. Stephen reluctantly also rose to his feet. The chairs made that stupid farting sound again.

"You could get better chairs than these for ten dollars each," he muttered.

It was an odd comment. The Station Leader frowned and peered up into his face. (He was a very big man; she was very small.)

"Are you all right, Stephen? In yourself, I mean?"

"Yeah, of course," Stephen grunted.

Then, realizing it wasn't in his interests to leave an impression of emotional maladjustment, he managed a sort of smile.

"I'm fine. Sorry. I know you don't make the rules. It's just, you know, there's so much I could be doing."

Mollified, the Station Leader smiled sympathetically as she showed him to the door.

"You know it's really not a bad thing to recharge your batteries. Your work will benefit from it. Try and enjoy your last days here."

The door closed behind him.

Outside the corridor window, a gardener was working along the perimeter fence with an herbicidal spray. Beyond was the Lutanian forest, that strange forest with no green in it, only pink and yellow and grey. The Station was full of its sweet but slightly sickly smell. It was like fermented caramel.

"Hey Steve," said his colleague Helen Fu, as he returned to his office. "A bunch of us are going to go over to New Settlement for a few beers. Fancy joining us?"

"No. No thank you. Not tonight."

"Oh come on Steve. You hardly ever come out these days! And you'll soon be leaving us!"

"Really, no. But I appreciate you asking."

He began to close down his workstation.

"Don't be a killjoy, Steve," persisted Helen. "Come and have some fun for once!"

Stephen didn't like to be put under pressure.

"What do you mean fun?" he barked, as if he were an animal that had been goaded one time too often. "We all stopped having anything to say to each other ages ago. Didn't you notice? All we do now is get drunker and drunker and louder and louder to try and cover up that fact. Excuse me if that doesn't strike me as fun."

Agitated, resentful, and (though he didn't so readily admit this to himself) ashamed by his own outburst, Stephen chose to walk the three miles through the forest back to his lodgings rather than take the bus. He was one of those very bright people who are quickly irritated by the slowness of those round them, and tend not to notice the many ways in which other people are actually wiser than they are. But at some level he *did* notice. At some level he knew there was something out there that other people understood and he just didn't quite get.

Fifty yards along the road, he was overtaken by the bus. A few of his colleagues looked out at him. Then the bus picked up speed, turned a corner and was gone. Inside it, they would of course still be discussing Stephen and his rudeness. But why should he care? He told himself he was much happier alone. And in some ways it was true.

He *was* alone, in any case, whether he liked it or not. He was profoundly alone. The Station was soon out of sight and, if it wasn't for the metalled road itself, he could have been back in the old Lutania: not just Lutania as it had been fifteen years back before the arrival of the Agency and the Transmission Station, but Lutania as it had been three centuries ago, before the first human colonists arrived, when the forest and its denizens belonged only to themselves. For even now the human encroachment hadn't gone very deep. These trees around him, these strange Lutanian trees that came in three different colors but never in green, stretched away for thousands of miles, interrupted only by the occasional road or tiny settlement.

It was a silent, somber, and utterly alien place. The pale tree trunks rose without branches for twenty feet before putting forth their pendulous pods and their giant leaves, pink or grey or yellow. There was no intermediate layer of vegetation to fill up the shadowy space beneath the canopy. The only breaks in the gloom were the intermittent ponds that were a feature of the entire forest: little patches of clarity and sunlight half-hidden by the trees.

And nothing moved. Most of the time nothing moved at all out there in the day except for the occasional twitching of a pod and the odd balloon-like floater drifting through the trees between the canopy and the forest floor, its feathery tendrils rustling as it knocked into trunks and bounced off again. The leaves drank in the sunlight. The ponds shone in the distance, as if they were windows into an altogether brighter place. The forest floor, covered in pinkish moss, lay like a newly vacuumed carpet in an empty room. Even the caramel air was still.

Then suddenly, so suddenly that he gasped out loud, Stephen came across three indigenes.

Goblins, the colonists called them, though the Agency tried to discourage the term. They were squatting round a large white pebble, just ahead of him and only a few yards off the road to his left. They nodded and bowed as they took it in turns to touch and prod their lump of stone.

One of them stood up. Half the height of a man and grey-skinned, it did indeed look very like a goblin in a children's story book, with its thin pointed face, its black button eyes and its V-shaped mouth, which could be seen as smiling teasingly, or could be seen as devoid of any meaning at all. And of course it was naked. Its large member dangled down like a length of hose, ridged with thick black veins.

They were always male, like all Lutanian creatures, each one of which mated with its corresponding tree.

"Oh crap," muttered Stephen.

His palms were sweating, his heart pounding. For the past four or five months, he hadn't seen one of the things close-up, let alone a group of them, only the occasional glimpse of an isolated individual, deep in the forest, wandering around by itself. He'd started to get used to the idea that the indigenes, like other Lutanian creatures, preferred to keep out of the way of human beings. It was the way he preferred it, too.

"Just leave me alone, can't you?"

They couldn't hear him, of course. (They communicated by microwave, so the Agency biologists had discovered, their tree-females acting as relay stations.)

"Just play with your bloody stone, why can't you, and leave me be? I'm not interfering with you."

The goblin watched him. Its two companions watched him. Six shiny black button



eyes. And all three were silent, didn't even glance at one another, just smiled and smiled at him with those odd thin faces that could either be seen as full of cunning, or as empty of anything at all.

Stephen knew perfectly well that, this close, there was no way he was going to be able to avoid it, the thing about indigenes that people most feared. In fact he'd hardly even finished framing the thought when the voice spoke inside his head.

"Hiding away."

It was his own voice, but not his own thought or his own inflection, as if his very thought-stream had turned out not really to *be* him, but only an instrument, a tool, that could as well be picked up and played with by others as by him.

"Hiding away," it said.

It had happened before, just three times before during the whole of his three-year tour of duty, that he'd come up this close to goblins and heard that voice.

"Can't get in," is what he had heard the first time.

"Ha ha. No home," the second.

He wasn't alone that second time. He'd visibly started with the shock of it, and the three young Agency people who were with him had laughed and demanded to know what the voice had said. (He'd been mortified. It hadn't struck him, then or since, that his companions were trying to distract themselves from inner voices of their own. He wasn't intuitive like that.)

There had been one other time, too, when he'd seen an indigene watching him intently from far off in the forest. He wouldn't even have noticed the creature if it hadn't been picked out by the sunlight around a pond. And the voice had been so quiet that, if he hadn't seen anything, he might well have been able to persuade himself that he'd just imagined it.

"Too scared to leave the path," it had said.

And for some reason, that had been the goblin encounter that had disturbed him most, the one that came back to him in dreams.

But I'm awake now, Stephen reminded himself, and he rubbed his hands over that raw pink face of his as he looked firmly ahead and walked on past the strange trio and their precious lump of stone.

You could tell when the settlement of Lisoba was near from the green plants that had begun to creep out from it onto the forest floor, clashing with the pink indigenous moss. The clearing itself, with its densely packed vegetable plots, was startlingly, shockingly green after the shadowy forest. Emerging from the trees and seeing Lisoba spotlit by the low evening sun, Stephen felt as if he were looking at a picture in a stained glass window. The little wooden houses, the rows of beans and maize seemed too bright, too simple, too perfect to be real.

"Good evening, Mr. Kohl," called the blacksmith Jorge Cervantes in his big bass voice, standing up from his tomato plants.

"Good evening, Mr. Cervantes. How's your day been?"

"Hello Mr. Agency Man," called Mad Gretel, who the villagers said was possessed by spirits.

"Hi there, Gretel."

Stephen was easier with the tenth-generation Lutanian settlers who lived in Lisoba than he was with his own Agency people at the Station. They didn't ask so much of him and, above all, they didn't expect him to be anything like them. His foreign origin gave him permission to be different and separate without causing offense.

He continued into the village, greeted from time to time by other villagers.

Lisoba was only twenty houses, plus a satellite dish and a prefabricated Community Center that the Agency had put in so that it could talk to the people of Lisoba



whenever it needed to, ask them things (for the Agency always longed to *know*), and provide them with lectures on subjects like family planning and nutrition and the world revealed by science. At the far side of the village, Stephen's landlady, Jennifer Notuna, had the largest house. A widow for some years, she topped up her income by renting out four rooms, the largest one to Stephen, the other three to Lutanian laborers working on an Agency housing project in the nearby town of New Settlement. (Less wealthy than Stephen, they slept two or three to a room.)

Jennifer and her assistant Lucia were hanging out sheets when Stephen returned. Jennifer was in her fifties, Lucia half her age, but they were both from the same Lutanian mold: big, brown, solid women, with tough faces, and loud firm voices.

"Good evening, Mrs. Notuna. Good evening, Lucia."

"Hey, Mr. Kohl. You hungry? Chicken and corn for dinner tonight."

Stephen smiled. After his encounter with the indigenes, it was good to be back with people who were completely at home here in Lutania. (The Lutanian response to any reference to indigenes was invariably an irritated and dismissive snort. In some remote areas beyond the Agency's reach, goblins were sometimes still shot as vermin.)

"Mrs. Notuna," said Stephen suddenly, "when you've got a moment, I wonder if I could have a word?"

His pink, curiously naked face reddened.

"Yes, okay, Mr. Kohl. Is everything all right? A problem with the rent money maybe?"

"No, no, nothing like that. It's . . . Well, to be honest, I could do with a little advice."

Jennifer and Lucia studied their lodger's glowing face. They rather liked him, even if he was from the Agency. They appreciated the fact that he had learned to speak Luto, the settlers' language. They liked the way he showed respect to Jennifer's age and did not call her by her first name, as most Agency people did without even asking. They even quite liked the way he looked. Pink and spiky though he was, he was also big and broad-shouldered, and he stood nearly a head taller than the average Lutanian man. "I'd give him one, no trouble at all," had in fact once been the verdict of Lucia, during one of their periodic sexual audits of their male lodgers. (It did not seem that way to Stephen, but Lucia was actually younger than him, though already a mother with three children.)

"Is it a girl, maybe?" asked Lucia, "a girl that you'll have to leave behind when you leave us?"

The two of them had often speculated about Stephen's personal relationships, worrying that he nearly always seemed to come straight back from work and spend all evening at his screen.

"Or a boy, even?" asked Jennifer, attempting to accommodate to the strange cultural mores of Agency people.

Stephen laughed uncomfortably.

"Oh no, nothing like that. It's just a few little worries—silly worries, really."

"Well, I'll gladly help if I can." Jennifer was actually rather flattered that an Agency person should think her advice worth seeking. "Just let me and Lucia get dinner sorted, and then I'll make us some coffee and we can go over to the bench where it's quiet."

Beyond the yard, on the far side of a low whitewashed wall, was Jennifer's vegetable plot, part of the rich green patchwork of the Lisoba clearing. She and Lucia grew beans here, and peppers and corn and sweet potatoes. A wooden wind-wheel creaked and groaned in the middle of the plot, pulling up water from the huge natural reservoir that lay beneath the forest and dishing it out in spurts into a network of irrigation channels lined with clay that the locals scraped up out of ponds. Beyond

the plot was a strip of cleared and slightly raised ground on which stood one of the village's many wooden statues of the god Yava. (He was small and wiry, with a narrow and rather cunning face and a somewhat prominent phallus.) After that came the uncleared forest, into the edges of which the odd stray tomato or bean plant had crept. The Agency had put in a chain-link fence to mark the boundary, and prevent indigenes from wandering in and annoying the people of Lisoba.

Jennifer's bench was up there next to the carved god. Stephen had often seen her and Lucia sitting over there in the dark when the dishes had been put away, dim shapes, with the silent forest behind them, their voices rising and falling with the characteristic Luto lilt, and the faintly glowing tips of their cigarettes periodically flaring up and illuminating their faces. (The fact that the Lutanians had rediscovered smoking during the three centuries of their isolation was a cause of great distress to the Agency, and was a subject of frequent lectures in the Community Center.)

"So what is it that's troubling you, Mr. Kohl?" Jennifer asked as they settled on the bench. "I'd have thought you'd be looking forward to going home after three whole years away. Yava knows, *I* would be."

She began to pour the coffee that Stephen had politely carried up on a tray. It was dusk. The big Lutanian sun had already sunk into the dark trees behind them, like a fat dollop of sweet red syrup.

"Well, yes, I suppose I am." Stephen said, without enthusiasm, as he took a cup from her. "To be honest, though, my worries are more to do with the transmission itself."

"Ha!" Jennifer exclaimed triumphantly, as if winning a long-standing argument. "Well, I can't say I blame you for *that*! Not in a million years would I let anyone put me in that dreadful machine. Not in a million years. They say it takes you to pieces, beams you out like a radio signal, then puts you together again at the other end."

Stephen smiled, amused by her vehemence.

"No way would I subject myself to that, Mr. Kohl," Jennifer insisted. "No way at all. My ancestors came here the long way, meaning to stay here for good, Yava rest their souls, and I'm going to stick to that plan."

Jennifer touched her forehead, supposedly Yava's doorway into the human soul. Then she tipped three wooden spoonfuls of brown sugar into her coffee, and stirred them in with the handle.

"But you've done it before, Mr. Kohl, haven't you? You came here by transmission in the first place. I'd have thought that would help."

She took tobacco and papers out of the pocket on her apron and began to roll one of her large cigarettes.

"And I've heard it's quite safe, really," she said, without much conviction, "however dangerous it seems. As safe as crossing the strait, one of your Agency friends told me."

She was referring to the five-mile strait between the flat forested continent in which they were sitting, and the rocky island of Balos, where the Agency had built Lutanian's new capital, with its National University, its House of Assembly, and its fine Academy of Science.

"Not that I've ever done that either," observed Stephen's landlady, who had never traveled more than twenty miles from Lisoba. "I've got more than enough here to keep me busy, and Balos is a nasty wicked place by all accounts."

"It's not the transmission itself," Stephen said. "It is scary, of course it's scary, knowing that for a while you're going to be nothing but a signal traveling through the ether, but that's not what's really bothering me. It's . . . it's to do with the memory thing."

"Oh yes, I heard about that. People lose some of their memories when they cross over, yes? That other Agency fellow said something about it."

Jennifer lit her cigarette and drew on it, lighting up their faces with that same orange glow that Stephen had often seen from the window of his room, looking up for a moment from the numbers on his screen.

"Yes," she conceded, "that must feel strange. But then again, people forget things all the time, don't they? And it's not as if you forget your whole life or anything, or forget who you are. Not from what that other man said."

"No, that's true."

Stephen wondered if he was worrying unnecessarily. It was so pleasant sitting there in the fading light with Mrs. Notuna, and the wooden statue, and the coffee, and the sounds from the village, and the tobacco smoke mingling with the caramel smell of the forest, rotten and sweet all at once.

"You're right," he said, "you don't forget your past at all, only the time immediately before the transmission itself. Four weeks before it, at minimum. Five and a half weeks at most."

He snatched up a bit of leaf from the ground and twisted it in his hands.

"To be honest, Mrs. Notuna, it's not the loss of memory as such. It's . . ."

He tossed aside the leaf and turned to face her.

"You see, there's a point, forty days before transmission—Day 40 as the Agency calls it—when you know you may not remember anything from then on. And then there's another point, Day 29, when you know *for sure* that you won't remember anything after that day. Everything you do and think and say, from last thing on Day 29 at the very latest, will be completely erased from your mind."

Jennifer grimaced and shook her head.

"That must feel strange."

"Yes. It feels very weird afterward, I can tell you, to know that you were walking and talking and doing stuff, only a short while ago, which you'll never recall, no matter how hard you try."

She pulled on her cigarette.

"You could write things down, perhaps?"

"Yes, and that's exactly what I did last time. I kept a diary. But when you look at your diary later, it doesn't work like a diary normally does, because it doesn't prompt your memory, not after the cut-off point. It's like you are reading the diary of another person."

He was no longer looking at Jennifer. He'd grabbed up that bit of leaf again and was twisting it fiercely back and forth.

"And of course . . . Well . . . You don't know if the diary is a complete record, do you? Or whether you left something out."

He pulled the leaf in two.

"So," began Jennifer tentatively, "are you worried that . . ."

Stephen interrupted her.

"What I did last time—and in fact it's what the Agency recommends—was to say goodbye to everyone on Day 40. That way you know for sure that you'll remember the occasion. You wouldn't want a goodbye that everyone can remember but you. And then you go off somewhere where no one knows you until the time for the transmission comes. You take a vacation."

Stephen sighed.

"You actually *have* to stop work, you see, for legal reasons," he said with great bitterness, "whether you want to or not."

Over at the house they saw the kitchen door open, spilling out a pool of yellow electric light into which stepped Lucia with a pail of scraps. She glanced toward them, curiously and a little enviously, then emptied the scraps into the pigpen and went back inside, closing off the light again as she shut the door behind her.

"So you did that, did you?" Jennifer prompted. "You said goodbye to everyone on Day 40 and then . . . ?"

"After that I went off to . . . Well, you wouldn't know the place, of course, but it's a resort by the sea, a good way away from everyone I knew. And, during the part of the time I can still remember, I stayed in a hotel and I swam in the pool, and I watched movies and played screen games, and just, you know, filled up the time."

He looked at her. She exhaled a cloud of smoke and picked off a strand of loose tobacco from her lower lip, but she didn't speak.

"I can remember all the way up to Day 29," said Stephen. "Up to that point I remember everything just as well as you'd expect to remember a vacation that happened three years ago."

Jennifer nodded, although vacations as such were outside her experience.

"And I remember," Stephen said, "I remember the first few hours of the morning of Day 29. The first few hours but nothing after that. My diary says that I carried on doing the same kind of things for the rest of that day and for all the days afterward, right up to Day 1—swims in the pool, beers, movies, screen games—but I don't remember. I don't remember a thing."

Jennifer watched him.

"Well, what else *would* you have done?" she asked.

"I don't know. I really don't."

He rubbed his hands over his big raw face.

"I am sorry, Mrs. Notuna. Us Agency folk must seem a funny lot to you Lutanians. We fret about things that you don't worry about at all. You're right. People forget things all the time. There's really nothing so unusual about it."

"No," said Jennifer, "we all forget. But perhaps you are . . ."

Stephen stood up.

"I appreciate the chat," he told her. "I'll let you get on now. There's a report I need to get finished while there's still time."

"Well, if you're sure you've had all the talk you needed."

Jennifer watched him as he made his way back to the house. Then she shrugged and began to roll another cigarette.

Five days before Day 40, Stephen met another indigene on his way home from work. It was a small one, all by itself, squatting right next to the road and playing with two short pieces of stick. Its skin was piebald, pink and light grey. It didn't even glance at him until he was only ten or fifteen yards away, then it looked up suddenly, though seemingly without the slightest surprise or alarm. The Agency biologists said that indigenes could sense the electrical activity in a person's brain from fifty yards at least.

"Go away!" growled Stephen.

He took a run at the creature, not really meaning to chase it, but hoping to give it a fright.

It snatched up its sticks and scampered off a few yards, holding them protectively against its chest.

"Fence head," said his own voice inside his brain. "Ha ha. Fence head."

This angered him. He went after it, and the indigene set off ahead of him, sometimes running, sometimes skipping, sometimes leaping like a springbok with both legs together.

"Yeah, go on! Clear off into the bloody forest!" gasped Stephen as he pounded after it.

It was way too fast for him and it knew it, for it stopped near a pond and stood there watching his heavy-footed, panting pursuit.

"Ha ha. Fence head. Scared," said the voice inside his head.

Then the indigene dived into the pond.

There was no sign of it when Stephen came gasping up to the water's edge. The pond was clear and empty. The creature must have swum through one of the hidden channels that linked the ponds together.

(In truth the so-called continent formed by the forest was not really solid land at all, but a kind of vast mangrove that covered several million square miles of Lutanian's shallow freshwater ocean. This fact was not immediately apparent because most of the water was roofed over, so to speak, by a dense network of roots, alive and long-dead, overlaid in turn by compost which had built up over many thousands of years to create a dry floor thick enough to cultivate, and to build houses on, and to lay metalled roads.)

Stephen sank down into a clump of soft white moss. Slowly his agitation subsided and his heart rate settled. And he was surprised to find that he didn't sink into dependency, but rather into a rather delightful sense of well-being. He was struck by what a beautiful and peaceful spot it was out here by the pond. The water was crystalline, the moss soft and bright, the air silent and still, the sun still high enough in the sky to pour down light into this opening in the forest and set it apart from the somber aisles of tree trunks all around it, so that it seemed a kind of sanctuary. Stephen felt he could happily stay here forever, if only the sun wouldn't set and his belly wouldn't ask to be fed. He wondered why he had never explored these ponds in all these past three years, only observed them from the road.

There was another pond not far off, and he made his way to it. Farther from the road, this new pond seemed even more beautiful than the first one, but another still lovelier-looking one beckoned from deeper in. This pond was bigger than the other two, a small lake almost. On impulse he stripped and plunged in. The cool mineral-rich water was wonderfully refreshing. He dived down and thought he made out the tunnels leading away under the trees, linking this pond up to all the rest. (So what if there were indigenes swimming around down there? What harm would they do him after all? What evidence was there to suggest they would do him harm?) He swam up and down. He did some somersaults and rolls. He lay and floated on his back, looking up at the rose pink Lutanian sky. Then he hauled himself out to lie naked on the moss.

He was wakened by a slight chill on his skin. Some time must have passed, for the sun was too low to shine down into the opening in the trees, and the pond, like the rest of the forest, was in shadow. His first thought was that somehow this made it still more beautiful and he sat for a while daydreaming in the dim light with his legs in the water, until finally coldness made him dry himself down and get his clothes back on.

Then he started to wonder if he knew the direction back to the road. The other ponds were no longer visible to use as landmarks, and he realized he couldn't remember where he'd been standing in relation to the road when he'd laid his clothes on the ground.

He had a moment of pure dread. Which way was the road? He had no idea. He'd be lost in the forest during the Lutanian night, when the indigenes and other creatures woke and began their hunt for food. He began to curse. And an old voice inside him captured his thought-stream, almost as the goblins did. *You're a fool. You can't look after yourself. You can't get anything right.*

"Get a grip on yourself, you idiot," he said out loud to himself. "All you've got to do is look for the sun."

Ten minutes later, he was safely back on the road. He felt rather ashamed of his

moment of panic, comparing himself unfavorably with more competent people who he imagined would never be so foolish: Leader Wilson, Jennifer Notuna, and even Helen Fu, who remembered details about other people that he would forget at once, and had worked so hard these last three years to help him join the life of the Station.

He strode forward briskly, anxious to get back to Lisoba as quickly as possible, and to the desk in his room.

But when he turned on his screen, he found it impossible to concentrate on his current task, which was analysis of the effectiveness of the Agency's literacy program.

He began instead to go through the diary that he'd kept before his last transmission.

*May 30th. Day 39: Got up. Had boiled egg for breakfast. Played chess for one hour then swam in pool. Watched movie King Kong (4th remake): quite enjoyed it, crap but fun. Went for walk down to beach. Had omelet and fries for lunch, and overheard couple at the next table talking about a young bar girl who was murdered here a few weeks back. Head beaten in with a spanner; apparently. There's quite a lot of crime here, the guy was saying, but most of it is never solved. Thirty thousand tourists pass through here every week, and a lot of the people who work here are illegal migrants, so it's hard to keep tabs on who is actually here, never mind who is doing what. And anyway the locals prefer to hush crime up, if possible, so as not to put visitors off. Apparently that dead girl never even made the local news.*

*Stayed in restaurant for a bit reading a boring book, then gave up, tossed the book, and came back. Quick dip, then reread briefing documents on Lutania and worked on Luto for a couple of hours. Not much point of course if I turn out to forget all this, but I probably won't, not this early. Very tired for some reason. Chicken for dinner. Two beers. Played Solo Agent for three hours. Watched most of a porn movie on TV—girl with green hair and huge boobs who liked threesomes—don't know why. Too tired and bored to think of something better to do, I guess.*

*I wish they'd have let me do some work.*

*Just about awake enough to write this. It's only 10.30 but can't keep eyes open any more.*

Yes, he remembered it perfectly well. King Kong, the omelet, the couple at the next table, the breasts of the green-haired girl: he remembered it all. Same with Day 38, 37, 36, 35, 34. All the movies, all the books, all the games, even many of the individual swims and beers, though, naturally enough, memory had elided these to some extent. Same with 33, 32, 31. He remembered them well. In fact he remembered these days rather better than he'd normally have expected to remember days from a vacation three years previously. His awareness of the steadily increasing likelihood that he would not remember them had lent a frisson, a vividness, that had actually made them *more* memorable than they otherwise would have been.

*June 8th. Day 30: Woke up about 5.30. This feels weird. Kind of exciting, but weird. There's a 87.3% chance that I won't remember anything about today at all. If that's turned out to be the case, hi my future self. You *were* alive now, I promise you. Even if you don't remember it. If you want to know what it feels like to be me right now, remember a time when you were excited about something but a bit scared, and in the meantime it was really boring. Like that time Uncle Gary took you caving, and there was that long boring drive to get there.*

*Anyway, I couldn't get back to sleep again so I got up and went for a swim. In*



*the sea this time. I thought it would be good on the beach when no one much was there yet. It was, too, and I had a good appetite for breakfast, which was . . .*

It seemed that in anticipation of not being remembered, his past self had begun to detach itself from the person it would become, addressing him in the second person, reassuring him, offering him tips as to how to reconstruct a moment in the event that he'd forgotten it without trace. But in fact he had *not* forgotten it. On that particular Day 30 (and it wouldn't necessarily be the same this time, when he reached Day 30 again) he had turned out to be one of the 12.7% who remembered the day in its entirety. In fact he remembered it very well.

*June 9th. Day 29: Now this is **very** weird. There's a 98.5 percent chance I won't remember today at all. And I know for certain, I know **absolutely** for certain, that even if I do remember today, or part of it, I won't remember tomorrow. So from tomorrow on, I can get up to what I like, my future self, and you won't know it. I could get away with all kinds of things in a place like this, as long as I didn't write it down in this diary. And, you never know, I might not feel like it, not after today. Ha ha. Only kidding.*

*No **seriously**, dear future self, I'm only kidding. The whole point of this diary is so you know what really happened. Not much point in it unless I write everything down, is there? That's why I wrote down about that porn movie I watched back on day 39 (and not just because there was a 99.1% chance that you'd remember it anyway, ha ha!!). If you remembered a thing and could see I hadn't written it down, you'd wonder, wouldn't you, what else I'd done that you didn't remember? And that would worry you wouldn't it?*

*(Weird. I was going to say it would certainly worry **me**!)*

*What did I do today? I lay in bed until 9 watching TV and playing screen games. I got up and went for a pool swim before breakfast. Then I had croissants and coffee and headed off down to town to get myself a new pair of swimming shorts, for no reason except something to do (seeing as the shorts can't come with me to Lutania.). I had another coffee in town and sat outside the café watching people go by: pretty girls on vacation, and not so pretty ones, migrant workers cleaning the streets and collecting the garbage. At one point a fire engine went by. They're yellow here, for some reason, not red. Then I walked to that cliff-top place to get some lunch, and then back to the hotel to watch a movie.*

*The movie was called War Hero. If you've forgotten it, which you probably have, don't worry, you've not missed much. And then . . .*

Stephen read and re-read Day 29's entry over and over. He could remember the beginning of that day, lying in bed watching TV. He remembered the croissants too, and the swimming shorts (they were green) and coffee in town, and an achingly pretty girl who walked by in a white bikini top and tiny shorts. But that was it. The yellow fire engine, the cliff-top lunch, the movie *War Hero*—he couldn't remember them at all.

And, worse than that, he couldn't remember the frame of mind in which he wrote the entry. Why this coquettish teasing of his future self, offering reassurance but undermining it, acknowledging his fears yet deliberately provoking them? It seemed that the less this past self of his expected to be remembered, the less it cared about the person it would become.

And that was Day 29. Even when he was writing that diary entry, he knew there was a small outside chance that he'd remember doing so. When it came to Day 28 that chance would have gone.



Yes, and there was something else he remembered about Day 29. He remembered that when he was getting out of the pool to go for breakfast, he'd thought about the next day, Day 28, the day when forgetting was a certainty, and he'd felt a strange, dark thrill. And he remembered—he was pretty sure he remembered—that he had spoken out loud to that darkness.

"No, not yet," he'd said to it, as if to a demanding child.

*June 10th. Day 28: Oblivion time. No one can see me, not even you, my future self. You'll remember yourself before this time, and yourself after it, but not this. So who am I, eh? Who the crap am I?*

*Well, at least I can make a fool of myself and know I won't be ashamed about it later. Not as long as I don't write any of it down here, anyway. Ha ha. Only kidding.*

*One thing's for sure: no point in practicing my Luto now!*

*Anyway, here's my exciting day. Breakfast. Pool. Chess. TV channel hopping. Solo Agent. Lunch. Town. Beach. Coffee + watched girls. TV. Dinner. 3 beers. Movie: Casino Royale (3rd remake). Solo Agent. Bed.*

*Yee-ha! Living the dream!*

There was a kind of surliness creeping in. The tone was of an adolescent asked what he had done at school that day. This became more evident as time went on.

*June 20th, Day 18: I'm sick of this diary. Why am I doing it? It's for your benefit, not mine. Okay, okay, keep your hair on. You're me, I know, I know. Yawn.*

*Breakfast. Beach. Bar. Lunch. Movie (too boring to remember its name). Pool. Beer. Dinner. TV. Solo Agent. Chess. TV. Bed. That do?*

The thing about surly adolescents was that, when pressed to tell, they only told the empty shell. What was inside, what was real to them, they kept back.

Stephen's Day 40 was marked at the Station by a stiff little farewell event. Leader Wilson made a speech. Everyone drank lukewarm Lutanian wine out of plastic cups and tried to think of nice things to say to a member of staff they hadn't liked all that much. His colleagues tried to make polite conversation with him about what he'd be doing next. Helen Fu, who was one of those people who feel the need to keep a group together, hugged Stephen and apologized for nagging and trying to organize him. Stephen stiffly acknowledged that he'd sometimes been unnecessarily abrupt. Then he downed a couple of full cups of wine, called out for everyone's attention, and made a short and excruciatingly awkward speech in which, to everyone's surprise and embarrassment, he apologized for having been such an unpleasant colleague.

"You're very nice people," he said, "and I'm sorry I've sometimes been unfriendly and too taken up with my work."

Helen Fu had tears in her eyes. He had redeemed himself at last! But worse than the tears in her eyes were the ones that Stephen noticed in his own.

"I've not made the best of you all, I can see that now. But I'd like you to know that I have appreciated you in my own way, and I'll remember you fondly."

He'd wasted these three years, he now realized, wasted them on all kinds of levels. And the sad part was that, though he would forget the last part of his time in Lutanian, he'd always remember these wasted years and the many opportunities he'd failed to take. The forgetting wouldn't begin, at the very earliest, until tomorrow morning.

When the wine was gone, some of his colleagues suggested they all go over to New Settlement (where many of them lived) to carry on drinking together. But Stephen said he really didn't mean to be unfriendly but he'd rather not.

"This has been very nice," he said. "But, if it's okay with you, I don't want my last memory of Lutania to be of me throwing up in some bar somewhere."

He even attempted a joke at his own expense.

"And anyway, you know me and nights out in bars. A man can only change himself so much."

So the women kissed him and the men shook his hand and wished him luck, and several of them called out jovial warnings to him to walk in a straight line and not wander off into the forest, and then they all climbed into the bus and waved to him until they'd turned the corner. He knew that when they'd settled back in their seats, they'd spend a minute or two telling each other that Stephen had been a funny sort of fellow but he wasn't so bad really, and then they'd forget him, pretty much for good.

He could have made himself part of their lives, but in fact he hadn't, and the moment for that had passed.

Bright stars packed the sky above the road as he walked, stumbling a little, through the caramel forest. He didn't see any indigenes, though once, in the distance, he saw a score or more of the vaguely pony-like creatures that the Lutanians called unicorns, emerging one by one from a pond and heading off through the trees in single file, faintly illuminated from below by the dim pink phosphorescence that came up from the moss at dead of night.

About halfway back, he stopped for a dip in another pond not far off the road. The algal-type growth that lined the ponds was also slightly luminous, so that the water glowed a faint soft pink. When he dived down into it he could see the tunnels quite clearly and unmistakably, stretching and branching away in every direction through the roots of the trees.

Jennifer and Lucia were sitting over on the bench.

"Hey, Mr. Kohl!" Lucia bellowed. "We didn't think you'd be back till much later."

"Go and get some beer from the kitchen and come and join us," hollered his landlady.

They smelled pleasantly of fresh sweat and cheap perfume and cigarette smoke as they moved over to let him squeeze in between them. Their bodies felt friendly and female and warm. Jennifer opened up the flagon of beer he'd brought over from the house and passed it back to him to take the first swig.

"Day 40, eh?" Mrs. Notuna said, prodding him affectionately. "A big night for you, Mr. Kohl."

"So tonight's the last night you'll remember?" asked Lucia. "Is that right?"

"Not necessarily," Jennifer told her knowledgeably, "It *could* be but it probably won't. He might remember the next ten days. But after that, he'll definitely remember nothing. Imagine that. Nothing at all."

"Yava save us," said Lucia, touching her forehead. She had been rolling a cigarette, and now she lit it, the flare of the match illuminating the carved god beside her.

Stephen giggled.

"You Lutanians are funny. You haven't a good word to say about the indigenes and you'd happily shoot the lot of them if you could, but you worship a god who looks just like them."

"What? Yava? A goblin?" Lucia was not only shocked by the suggestion but genuinely amazed. The thought had never once occurred to her.

"He's got nothing to do with that ugly lot, Mr. Kohl, I can assure you," said Jennifer firmly. "Our ancestors brought him over with them when they first came here."

Both she and Lucia were completely unable to see, even slightly, a similarity that was commented on by every Agency worker who arrived in Lutania. But drunk

though he was, Stephen knew that it would be tactless to tell them that no god back home had ever looked like Yava, and certainly not the ones that the first colonists had, as a matter of record, brought with them.

People needed their verities to be eternal. This was true, after all, even of the Agency, with its particular idea of rationality, and its particular notion of universal human rights.

"But Yava can see into your head like they can, can't he?" he said. "Isn't that what you believe?"

He passed Jennifer the flagon and she took a long swig. He felt wonderfully comfortable and at ease, with these women on either side of him.

"Goblins can't really see into your head," Jennifer snorted dismissively, handing the flagon to Lucia.

"Well, all right," she reluctantly conceded, "they reflect back what's in your head, like a mirror, but they don't *understand* anything."

Unusually, this traditional Lutanian view was broadly shared by Agency biologists, who speculated that indigenes' ability to stir up uncomfortable feelings in the minds of potential predators served the same defensive purpose as smell did for a skunk, or a nasty taste for a toad.

"They might *think* they understand," Lucia agreed, "but really they don't at all."

"Horrid creatures," sniffed Jennifer. "It's giving them too much credit to say they think at all. They might have hands and stand up on two legs, but they're only animals. I don't care what anyone says."

Then suddenly she laughed out loud.

"Honestly, Mr. Kohl! You Agency people! Yava like a goblin indeed! No, of *course* not! He doesn't even come from Lutania. You ought to know that. He comes from the same place as you."

She lit up a cigarette, drew deeply on it, and exhaled with a contented sigh. Nothing more seemed to need to be said on the subject of Yava and the indigenes, and the three of them sat for a while in comfortable silence.

"What bad thing would you do, Lucia," Jennifer asked after a time, "if you knew that no one you know could see you, and if you knew you wouldn't remember a thing afterward?"

"It couldn't really happen, though, could it?" said Lucia piously, touching her forehead. "Yava could still see and remember what I did."

"Yes, all right," conceded Jennifer, with slight impatience. "But just suppose for a moment he couldn't. After all, Mr. Kohl here doesn't really know about Yava, does he? None of the Agency people do."

"That's because they've got bone heads," said Lucia, rapping Stephen on the forehead with her knuckles, and then giving him a little kiss on the cheek to show no hard feelings. "That's why they sit staring at those screens all the time, if you ask me. It's the only way they know how to connect up to anything."

She took a thoughtful swig of beer, then laughed.

"Okay, I'll tell you, then. There's a good-looking bloke called Paul down at Porto. You know him, Jennifer, that man in the hardware store? If I really believed no one would ever know, not even Yava, and I myself wouldn't remember, perhaps I'd have a fling with him. He's asked me often enough, and why not say yes, if I knew I'd forget it completely afterward so it wouldn't come between me and Luis?"

She considered this.

"Mind you, Paul would have to forget too."

"You've got a one-track mind, Lucia," her employer told her.

"Well, you did ask, and I'm not saying I'd really do it, am I? I'm just saying *if*. Anyway, Mrs. Goody-goody, how about you? What would you do?"

Jennifer puffed on her cigarette.

"All kinds of things you could do, couldn't you?" she said after a while. "You could steal something you really wanted, and then put it somewhere where you'd find it later and think that you'd just been lucky."

"*Boring!*" complained Lucia, reaching across to give Jennifer a prod. "Boring, boring! Is that *really* the worst you can come up with, old lady?"

"The worst I'm telling you," Jennifer chuckled.

"And anyway," she said, "maybe you don't really know until you get in that situation. Maybe your heart keeps its secrets even from you, until it's quite sure they'll never be found out."

She took a few last thoughtful drags on her cigarette, then tossed the butt end onto the ground. Suddenly she clapped her hands.

"That's *it*, isn't it, Mr. Kohl?" she exclaimed. "That's the thing that bothers you. You just don't *know*."

"Yes," said Stephen. "Exactly. That's why I wanted to carry on working. So I'd have something to do and people to watch over me."

Lucia laughed.

"Well, if that's all it is, it's easy to fix. Stay with Jennifer and me. Don't go away from here until it's time for your transmission. Jennifer will find you work to keep you busy, won't you Jennifer? And we'll both watch over you and see you behave yourself. It doesn't matter to us what you remember or what you forget, and when you've gone, we'll never see you again."

"Yes, of course," Jennifer said. "If you really want work, there's plenty to be done round here."

"Well . . . Wow. Thank you. That's great. If you're really sure, of course."

Stephen's relief was so palpable that Lucia laughed and kissed him again.

"That Agency of yours is really stupid," Jennifer said, "telling you to say goodbye to everyone and go away on your own, when anyone can see that what you really need at a time like this is other people around you. Other people can be Yava's eyes for you, even if you don't believe in him. And then it doesn't matter if you remember or not."

Lucia nodded.

"You know what the trouble is with you Agency people? You try and work everything out in your heads. You try and do it all with words and ideas. And when they're gone, you think nothing's left."

"Yes," said Jennifer. "A person's more than the thoughts that go through their head, and whether they remember them or not."

On Day 39 Stephen got up early in the morning. His head was throbbing from the night's drinking, but he worked all morning for Jennifer Notuna, feeding the pigs, weeding the bean patch, and mending an old shed door. And all that afternoon, after eating lunch with Jennifer and Lucia, he worked on dismantling the remains of an old pigsty, carefully chipping the mortar off each baked brick, so it could be stacked and used again. By dinnertime, both his hands were bleeding and his back was aching, but he felt very cheerful and content, and the dinner tasted like the food of paradise.

On Day 38 he began laying foundations for a new sty, to replace the pen in which the pigs now lived. He spent most of the morning digging holes at the four corners of the new structure, right down through the soil to the matted substrate of dense tangled roots, as he had seen local builders do. (Jennifer laughed at this and reminded him it was a pigsty he was building, and not a two-story house). Then in the afternoon he bought some bags of cement from one of Jennifer's neighbors, and mixed it up with gravel in batches and poured it in. There was still time after that, while the cement was setting, to go into the edge of the forest to fetch some fuel for Jennifer's stove.

After dinner, he helped Jennifer wash up the dishes (it was Lucia's day off), and then sat with her on her bench while she had her evening smoke.

"It's a shame I may not remember any of this," he told her, "because I honestly don't think I've ever been happier in my life."

She beamed at him proudly and patted his knee.

"Well, write it in your diary if that bothers you so much. And I'll write down that it's true. We can *see* the change in you. It's like you've become a different man."

Day 30 came, the day that he had an 87.3% chance of forgetting. He fed the pigs in their new sty. He let the chickens out of their new coop. He went and checked the wind pump with its new and improved wooden mechanism. He was walking over to the yard where he planned to repair and repaint the wall, when something shifted inside him, and he admitted to himself for the first time that he was beginning to feel a little bored. It wasn't severe, it wasn't something that he couldn't easily shake off, but deep within him a tiny worm of boredom balked for a moment at the idea of another day of chores, another day of Jennifer and Lucia proudly clucking over him as if they personally had saved his soul, another day of inhabiting this humble and dependent new persona.

"What did they think I was going to do if I went off on my own?" he muttered crossly as he began to chip loose cement out of the wall. "What did they think they were rescuing me from?"

And why was he letting them rule his life anyway? They were delightful people, of course, but they knew next to nothing. Neither of them had been further than Porto or New Settlement. Neither had a reading age of more than seven.

"And let's face it," he muttered, "they're so pig ignorant here they worship a goblin and don't even know it."

He laughed, but then he checked himself.

"Come on," he distinctly heard himself say, "it's still only Day 30. All this is for later."

That scared him. The rest of the day, he worked hard, and reminded himself regularly how kind Jennifer and Lucia had been to him, and how unusually content he had been these last nine days, and how much better and more rewarding (and how

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much *less* boring) this Day 30 had turned out compared with the one he'd spent back in that wretched seaside resort, playing screen games and watching movies alone in his room.

That evening, while Lucia and Jennifer were washing up the dinner, he took a bottle of beer and went over to the bench to wait for them.

The village was settling into evening. The sun had sunk once again below the tree-tops, electric lights shone here and there across the settlement, and the sights and sounds of the village took on a completely different quality from the sights and sounds of daytime. Things were closer, more intimate, more self-contained.

A cockerel crowed. Someone banged on a metal pan. A mother shouted to her children. Mr. and Mrs. Roberti ate out in their yard, silent but for the clink of cutlery on plates. Mad Gretel called something out and laughed. Mr. Zorrana and his sons hacked and chipped away stubbornly at a new irrigation channel, though they were only vague silhouettes in the dusk. A dog barked. A moped emerged into the clearing. Its headlights swept across the wooden wall of a barn on which "YAVA SEES ALL" was painted in Luto in large red and white letters, and then lit up the shiny satellite dish. The dog barked again . . .

It was all so familiar and so small.

"Mummy's boy," said his own voice suddenly inside his head.

Stephen started. It took him a few seconds to locate the grey-skinned indigene in the dark, but the creature was actually directly behind him, just outside the boundary fence. It was squatting with its left shoulder pressed up against the chain link, absorbed with some object it was holding right up close to its face and turning this way and that in its hands.

"Go away, you nosy thing," growled Jennifer, coming over to join him on the bench. "Get away with you!"

She chucked handfuls of dirt at the creature. When that didn't shift it, she went up and kicked the fence.

The goblin stood up. Smiling, or seeming to smile, it held out the object it had been playing with, almost as if it intended to taunt them with a treasure that it possessed and they didn't. But the object itself was a small empty pod, such as could be found all over the forest floor, and perhaps the gesture had no real meaning at all.

"Mummy's boy. Tee hee."

"Horrid creatures," muttered Jennifer as it skipped off into the forest.

She settled herself onto the bench with a weary but contented sigh, and took out her tobacco and papers from her apron pocket. Then she turned to him and smiled.

"All well with you, Mr. Kohl?"

It was odd. He had to force himself to meet her friendly gaze.

On Day 29, Jennifer and Lucia held a party for Stephen to mark the last day that he might possibly still remember after he returned home. Everyone came to eat their food and to drink to Stephen's health: Mr. and Mrs. Zorrana and their boys, Mr. and Mrs. Roberti, Lucia's handsome husband Luis and their children, Jorge Cervantes and his two wives, the other lodgers, even Mad Gretel, who the villagers thought was possessed . . . Everyone in the village came, and everyone listened to Lucia and Jennifer telling the tale yet again of how they'd persuaded Stephen to stay on and help them rather than go away and be alone during his final days in Lutania.

"He's never been so happy in his life," they told everyone proudly, after they'd made the traditional chicken sacrifice to Yava, "he's told us so himself."

The villagers had heard this before, many times over in fact, in various versions both at first and second hand, but they gladly heard it again, and gladly repeated it yet again to one another, for it gloriously vindicated the simple peasant way of life



that the Agency was always nagging them to change, and from which their own young people were increasingly prone to flee.

Stephen was not at ease. He hated the way the villagers prodded him and poked him and plied him with drinks. He hated the sense of himself as a prized exhibit.

"I'm very tired," he told Jennifer and Lucia toward midnight. "I think I'll head off to bed."

The three of them were sitting on the yard wall under the stars, Stephen beside the two women. Neighbors sat around them on kitchen chairs and wooden boxes, watching and listening minutely.

Stephen cleared his throat.

"I've decided to go away for a bit in the morning," he told the two of them, feeling the hot blood prickling round the roots of his hair. "I think I'll go over to Balos. May as well check that out before I say goodbye to Lutania, even if I won't be able to remember it."

There was an audible collective sigh of surprise and disappointment, and then the neighbors all turned to Jennifer or Lucia to observe how they received this news.

"But we thought you were going to stay until the time for your transmission!" said Jennifer.

"Yes, but, like my boss said, when you think about it, it's really not such a bad idea to grab the chance of a vacation."

"You can take your vacation here. Stop work and put your feet up here in Lisoba. That's fine with us."

"Balos is a big bad place, Mr. Kohl," said Jorge Cervantes. "It's not somewhere to go for a rest."

The rest of the little audience agreed. People began to tell stories about folk from Lisoba and the neighboring villages who'd gone to Balos and come to harm. Mr. Roberti told of a girl who became a drug addict and ended up in prison. Mrs. Zorrana told of a boy who'd worked for a whole year on an Agency building site, and then lost everything he'd earned in a single night's gambling in Balos. And two or three people mentioned the well-known case of a young woman called Susan from Porto who had gone to Balos less than a year ago, and ended up being raped and killed.

"She was all cut up apparently," said Mr. Zorrana.

"Cut wide open," said Mrs. Roberti with a certain grim satisfaction, "and all her insides taken out. And it wasn't done by foreigners. They were village boys, as Lutanian as she was."

(The stories might be exaggerated, but, in spite of its University and its Academy of Science, Balos really was a lawless place, full of bewildered Lutanians trying to be city people when their whole culture had evolved for small villages like Lisoba, where everyone knew everyone else, and countless iterations of Yava were always present to watch over those few moments that neighbors overlooked.)

"I appreciate your concern," Stephen interrupted after the sixth or seventh story, "but you do need to remember I'm not some naïve peasant. I grew up in a big city. *Really* big. You've no idea. Balos might seem big and scary to you but it's a quiet little backwater to me."

They all stared at him. If Balos was a backwater, what did that make Lisoba?

Stephen rubbed his hands over his burning face.

"I know I should have given you notice," he told Jennifer, "and of course I'll pay you the full rent up to the day of my transmission."

He made himself meet her eyes for just one moment. He could see how hurt she was, how humiliated in front of the village. Then he turned quickly away.

None of this really mattered, he told himself. It was past midnight. Day 29 had gone.

He looked out into the dark, away from all of them, and smiled. ○



# PUG

Theodora Goss

Theodora Goss was born in Hungary and spent her childhood in various European countries before her family moved to the United States. Although she grew up on the classics of English literature, her writing has been influenced by an Eastern European literary tradition in which the boundaries between realism and the fantastic are often ambiguous. Her publications include the short story collection *In the Forest of Forgetting* (2006); *Interfictions* (2007), a short story anthology co-edited with Delia Sherman; and *Voices from Fairyland* (2008), a poetry anthology with critical essays and a selection of her own poems. She has been a finalist for the Nebula, Crawford, and Mythopoeic Awards, and has won the World Fantasy and Rhysling Awards. Her gentle SF story about a group of Victorian girls and “Pug” is her first tale for *Asimov’s*.

*“Pug is flat, like most animals in fiction. He is once represented as straying into a rosebed in a cardboard kind of way, but that is all . . .”*

—E.M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*

**Y**ou don’t know how lonely I was, until I met Pug.

In summer, tourists come to Rosings. The coaches are filled with them. They want to see where Roger de Bourgh murdered Lady Alice, or where Lady Alice’s grand-niece Matilda de Bourgh hid King Charles, in the cellar behind a cask of port, from the Roundheads. There has always been a rumor that her son, from her hasty marriage to Walter d’Arcy, resembled the king more than his father. The de Bourghs have never been known for acting with sober propriety. Miss Jenkinson relishes the details. “And here,” she says, “you will see the bloodstains where Lady Alice fell. This floor has been polished every day for a hundred years, but those stains have never come out!” And indeed there are, just there, discolorations in the wood. Whether they are the bloodstains of Lady Alice, I can’t tell you.

When the tourists come, I go to my room, in the modern wing of the house where even Miss Jenkinson’s ingenuity will find no bloodstains, or out into the garden. If, by chance, they happen upon me, I admire the roses, or the fountain with its spitting triton, and they assume I am one of them. Of course, if Miss Jenkinson sees me, she scolds me. “Miss Anne, what will your mother think! Outside on a day like this, and without a shawl.” With the fog rolling over the garden. We are in a valley, at Rosings. We are almost always in a sea of fog.

I could hear them that day, the tourists. In the fog, their voices seemed to come from far away, and then suddenly from just beside me, so I ducked into the maze. It is not a real maze: for that, the tourists must go to Allingham or Trenton. It is only a series of paths between the courtyard, with its triton perpetually spitting water, while stone fish leap around him in rococo profusion, and the rose garden. But the paths are edged with privet that has grown higher than I, at any rate, can see. I have called that place the maze since I was a child. When I am in the maze, I can pretend, for a moment, that I am somewhere else.

So there I was, among the privets, and there he was, sitting on his haunches, panting with his pink tongue hanging out. Pug.

Of course I did not learn his name until later, when he showed me the door. The door: inconsistent, irritating, never there when you want it. And at the best of times, difficult to summon, like a recalcitrant housemaid.

But there was Pug. I assumed he had come from Huntsford, from the parsonage or one of the tradesmen's houses. He was so obviously cared for, so confident as he sat there, so complacent, even fat. And he had a quality that made him particularly attractive. When he looked at you with his brown eyes, and panted with his pink tongue hanging out, he looked as though he were smiling.

"Here, doggie," I said. He came to me and licked my hand. I knew, of course, that Mother would never allow it. Not for me, not in, as she called it, my "condition." But as I said, I was lonely. "Come on, then." And he followed me, through the courtyard, into the kitchen garden with its cabbages and turnips, and through the kitchen door.

I had no friends at Rosings, but Cook disliked Miss Jenkinson, and the enemy of my enemy was at least my provisional ally. I knew she would give me a scrap of something for Pug. He gobbled a bowl of bread and milk, and looked up at me again with that smile of his.

"If Lady Catherine finds him in your room, there will be I don't know what to pay," Cook said, wiping her hands on her apron.

"Mother never comes into my room," I said.

"Well, I'll tell Susan to hold her tongue. Only yesterday I said to her, you're here to clean the bedrooms, not to talk. Someday that tongue of yours is going to fall off from all the talking you do. And won't your husband be grateful!"

"All right, Cook," I said. "I'll take him up, and could you have Susan bring me a box with wood shavings, just in case, you know."

"Certainly, Miss." She patted Pug on the head. "You're a friendly one, aren't you? I do like dogs. They're dirty creatures, but they make a house more friendly."

And that's how Pug came to Rosings. I carried him, as quietly as I could, past the gallery. "Every night," Miss Jenkinson was saying, "Sir Fitzwilliam d'Arcy walks down the length of this hall and stands before the portrait of his brother, Jonathan d'Arcy, who chopped off his head with an axe right there in the courtyard and married his wife, Lady Margaret de Bourgh. Visitors who have seen him say that he carries his severed head in his arms." I heard gasps, and a "Well, I never!" The de Bourghs and the d'Arcys. We have been marrying and killing each other since the Conquest.

Later, when I had learned something of how the door works, I discussed it with the Miss Martins.

"Mary had a thought," said Eliza. "She did want to tell you, although I told her, Miss, that you might not like hearing it."

"Please call me Anne," I said. "We share a secret, the three of us—and Pug. So we should have no distinctions between us. We know about the door. Surely that should make us friends."

We were sitting in the Martins' garden, at Abbey-Mill Farm. I could smell the roses that were blooming in the hedge, and the cows on the other side of the hedge, in the pasture. Eliza had folded her apron on the grass beside her. She was fair and freckled, although she used Gower twice a day. She looked what she was, the perfect English farm girl, with sunlit hair and a placid disposition. Mary was still wearing her apron, as though about to go in and finish her cleaning, but she had woven herself a crown of white clover. She was darker than her sister, with a liveliness, like a gypsy girl from Sir Walter Scott. An inquisitiveness. She had been the scholar, and regretted leaving school.

"Well," said Mary, "this is what I've been thinking, Miss—Anne. Eliza and me, we're the ones to whom nothing happens. There's Robert marrying Harriet, and all the high and mighty folks of Highbury marrying among themselves, and even the servants seem to have their doings. But us—we just milk the cows, and clean the house with Mother, and take care of the garden, day after day, no different. And begging your pardon, Anne, but nothing happens to you either. You read and you go out riding in your carriage, that's all. And what could happen to Pug?" Who was lying contentedly on the grass beside us. At Abbey-Mill Farm, the sun almost always shone. I was glad to escape, for a while, the fogs of Rosings.

"You're right," I said. "Nothing ever does happen to me. I don't think anything ever will."

"Well then," said Eliza, "here's what Mary thinks. She thinks the door is for us. That it was put there just so we could find each other. Do you think that could be true?"

I put a clover flower on Pug's nose, and he stared at me reproachfully before shaking his head so that it fell onto the grass. "We are told there is providence in the fall of a sparrow. Why not in the opening of a door?"

"That's lovely, Miss," said Eliza. "Just like Mr. Elton in church."

When I was a child, I was not allowed to have toys. I slept on a bare bed, in a bare room. Those were the days of Dr. Templeton. He believed in strengthening. If I could be strengthened, I would no longer be sick or small. So there were cold baths, and porridge for breakfast, and nothing but toast for tea. Then came Dr. Bransby, who believed in supporting. If my constitution could be supported, then I would be well. Those were the days of baths so hot that I turned as red as a lobster, fires in July and draperies to keep out drafts, and rare roast beef. I have been on a diet of mashed turnips, I have been to Bath more times than I remember, I have even, once, been bled. Nothing has ever helped. I have always been sick and small. When I walk up stairs, I am always out of breath; when I look in the mirror, there are always blue circles under my eyes, blue veins running over my forehead. I always remind myself of a corpse.

When I was a child, I was not allowed to have friends. Other children, "young horrors," as Mother called them, would be too softening, said Dr. Templeton, too trying, said Dr. Bransby. One day, so lonely that I could have cried, I wandered through the corridors, almost losing myself, and discovered the library. ("Over a thousand volumes," said Miss Jenkinson. "The gilding on the books alone is worth more than a thousand pounds.") Dr. Templeton's regimen had confined me to the schoolroom, but Dr. Templeton had been summoned to Windsor Castle, to attend the King himself. And Dr. Bransby, whose carriage was expected that afternoon, had not yet arrived. Miss Jenkinson, thinking I was asleep, had put her feet up and fallen asleep with a handkerchief over her face. I could hear her snoring.

I tiptoed, frightened, down the endless corridors of Rosings, with de Bourghs and d'Arcys frowning at me from the walls. At the end of one corridor was an archway. I

walked through it and saw shelves of books going up to heaven. ("The fresco on the ceiling was painted by an Italian, Antonio Vecchi," said Miss Jenkinson. "Although unlikely to appeal to our modern tastes, in his day the painting, of classical gods disporting themselves in an undignified manner, was considered rather fine. If you look in the corner there, up to the right, you'll see where the painting was left unfinished when Vecchi eloped with Philomena de Bourgh. He was later shot in the back by Sir Reginald.")

Will you laugh if I tell you that the first book I read, other than my Bible and the *Parent's Assistant*, which Miss Jenkinson appreciated for its edifying morals, was Aristotle's *Metaphysics*? How little I understood of it then! How little I understand still, even after discussing it with Dr. Galt. But Dr. Galt seldom has time for long discussions.

My cousin Fitz teased me about my serious reading matter. "You don't read like a girl, Anne," he said, "but as if you're prepping for Oxford. Look, I brought you some grapes from the conservatory." I was not allowed to eat fruit, which Dr. Bransby said was not sufficiently supportive. But how tired I was of soft-boiled eggs and beef tea! "If you won't tell, I'll teach you a little Latin."

From his window, Fitz could see when Dr. Bransby walked to the Parsonage, where he could smoke his pipe without Mother finding out. She did not approve of tobacco. When Dr. Bransby was out of sight, Fitz would say, "Come on, Anne, let's go down to the maze!" We would laugh at the triton, with his absurdly distended cheeks, and crouch among the rosebushes, where no one could see us, feeling the pleasure of being unsupervised and completely hidden.

Of course, I knew why Fitz came, or had to come. Those portraits of the de Bourghs and d'Arcys—they haunted us both like ghosts.

Once, when I was fifteen, I said to him, "I'll never be a beauty, will I?"

"You're distinctive in your own way, Anne," he said.

That wounded me, although he had meant it as a compliment. Was woman ever wooed thus? No, I don't think so either.

Finally, Dr. Galt said, "It's your heart, Miss de Bourgh, and there's nothing to be done about it. You must live as normally as you can." Thank goodness for Dr. Galt.

It was Pug who showed me the door.

"Take that dog out of the drawing room at once!" said Mother. "Can't you see that he's shedding on the cushions? Really, Miss Jenkinson."

She would never, of course, say it directly to me. I was the delicate one, the last of the de Bourghs, who must be coddled and tortured into health. Into marrying and producing an heir. She steadfastly treated Pug as Miss Jenkinson's dog, although every night that he was at Rosings, he slept in my bed, curled beside me, snorting in his sleep. She would never give in to something as vulgar as fact.

I took Pug into the garden. It had rained the night before. I had seen the lightning from my bedroom window, flashing over the avenue of lime trees, over the park where the tourists fed the deer. The triton looked wet and somehow glum. The privets were bent awry, as though they had been engaged in a mad dance. The path through the rose garden was covered with petals, like wet rags. Pug ran over them, toward the lime alley. And suddenly, he was no longer there.

"At first," said Eliza. "I couldn't see the door at all. But now I always see it, that—shiver, when it opens. Mary could always see it better than I can. And she seems to be able to—call it, sometimes."

"I don't know how I do it," said Mary. "I just call, and it comes. But not always. Don't worry, Miss, you'll see it better after a while. And you've got Pug. He seems to be able to smell it, almost. As soon as the door opens, he goes right to it."

That first time, the door opened into another garden. It surrounded a house, modern, not particularly attractive, smaller than Rosings. I wandered around the garden, curious and confused, not certain where I was or what I should do. Finally, I looked in through a window. A woman, stately, placid, as old as Mother but without her appearance of constant activity, sat on a sofa. "Why, Pug," she said, "wherever have you been?" Pug jumped up on the sofa and sat beside her, like a cushion.

"The strangest thing," said Eliza, "is that when you go through the door to another place—or time—no one seems to notice that you're there. And when you come back, no one seems to notice that you were gone. It's like being a ghost."

"Do you think it's wrong for us to go through it, Miss?" asked Mary. "Perhaps it's a devilish device, as Mr. Elton would say, designed to tempt us." She seemed genuinely distressed. I put my hand on hers.

"Don't be silly," said Eliza. "Miss de Bourgh has already told us that it can be explained naturally, like that machine at the Royal Society. Like lightning. Surely nothing in nature is of the Devil. Surely everything in nature has been created by God. And think of what finding the door has done for us! We've been to London, to Bath. Do you think the Miss Martins of Abbey-Mill Farm would have been able to travel to those places? And thank you again, Miss," she nodded to me, "for showing us around Pemberley. It was a kindness my sister and I will never forget."

"Do you believe, Miss, that the door is created by God?" asked Mary.

"I don't know," I said. "But you said, once, that we are the people to whom nothing happens. I wonder if, perhaps, there is a provision for us. I know this sounds silly, but—a provision for us specifically, for the people to whom nothing happens. Perhaps the door has been sent—to allow us to communicate with one other, so that we will not be, you know, lonely."

"But then why only the three of us—and Pug?" asked Mary. "Surely we aren't the only ones to whom nothing happens."

"Don't forget Mrs. Churchill," said Eliza. "Although she did not encourage the acquaintance, after that first meeting in Bath. I think, to her, the Miss Martins of Abbey-Mill Farm were of no consequence. She was not as condescending as you are, Miss. And we have not seen her now for more than a year."

"But that shows there are others," I said. "That we have not found them does not mean they do not exist. Perhaps it's time we started looking for them."

Here are the things my mother wanted me to have. Beauty, in which I failed her completely. Come to the mirror, let us look at my face, so pale, so insignificant. Wit, ditto. Once, when I was a child, Fitz's sister Georgie came to visit. She said to me, after an afternoon during which we were supposed to be playing, "I would like you better, Anne, if you weren't so dull." Accomplishments, of course, I could not have. Dr. Templeton and Dr. Bransby agreed: I must not hold a pencil or paintbrush, must not practice the pianoforte, must not under any circumstances learn to dance. I must not exert myself in any way. Dr. Galt said, "What a pair of quacks." But by then it was too late; I was neither beautiful, nor witty, nor accomplished. I had nothing to recommend me except a fortune.

And of course, Mother wanted me to marry Fitz.

Fitz said to me once, as we were walking in the garden, "Anne, we can talk to each other, can't we? I mean, we used to be friends when we were children."

He looked, as he always looked, sad and uneasy. I think he had read too much German philosophy. Once he had told me that at Oxford he had lost his faith in both humanity and God.

"There's no reason we can't be friends now," I said.

"Then—would you care terribly if we didn't marry?"

I put my arm through his. "Oh, Fitz. Marry that girl, the one who came with the Lucases, who plays the piano so badly." She did play badly, I was jealous enough to say that. I cared, of course. It was difficult not to love Fitz. But I remembered what Dr. Galt had told me.

"It's your heart, my girl. It's like a lake in there, sloshing around. I wish it had a good, steady beat like a piston. Someday, we'll be able to replace the human heart with a machine."

"That doesn't sound at all nice," I said. "How can a machine love?"

There were other things I asked him: "Am I going to die?"

"We're all going to die. And if you're careful, you won't die any sooner than most. But that means no marrying. You must learn to content yourself with the pleasures of an old maid. The first child you have—then you *will* die, Anne. And perhaps the child will die as well. Do you understand?"

"If Mother were here, she would dismiss you at once. Do you know I've been destined to marry my cousin since I was born? It's a sort of dynastic alliance."

Dr. Galt laughed. "It's time the de Bourghs and the d'Arcys had some new blood. You've been marrying each other too long." Then he shook his finger at me. "But I'm serious, Anne. You can live long and well, but you must find another way."

And: "What if there were a door that could take me, in an instant, between two places that are far away from each other, perhaps even far away in time—into the past for instance, or even the future, when Napoleon will be defeated."

"As we all hope he will be!"

"If there were such a door, how would it work?"

"So you've been following my advice."

He had told me, "Most of the women I know waste their lives embroidering on silk and reading French novels. You should hear my own daughters, talking about the regiment! It's soldiers, soldiers all day long. But you, Anne, with your natural ability and the library here at Rosings, can develop the intellect that God gave you. Read philosophy, read history. Learn Greek. There is nothing in the field of scholarship that you can't accomplish."

"Despite my broken heart?"

"Because of your broken heart."

"Doors that transport you through space and time are not my specialty," he answered. "But at a meeting of the Royal Society I once saw a mechanical apparatus with two arms, which resembled a headless doll. A spark of electricity jumped from one arm to the other, instantaneously, without seeming to have passed through the space between. Later that day, at a lecture attended by the King, I heard a philosopher say that we are all composed of energy. Why should we not, with a mechanical device, or a door as you called it, pass from one place to another, like that spark?"

And he smiled at me, as though I were a clever child. That is what we see in the mirror, a sick child, although I am almost twenty.

"Keep reading, Anne. Keep exercising your mind as much as you can. If you can't have the life that other women have, remember you can still have a life that is fulfilling, even in some ways superior to theirs."

This is what I told Fitz: "Marry her with my blessing. And if you accomplish nothing else, you will have made Mother thoroughly angry. That in itself will be an accomplishment, I think. Life at Rosings will be so much more interesting for a while."

He looked down at the path. "I don't even know if we could be happy together. But I can't help loving her. Oh, I'm a fool!" My introspective, morose cousin. Would he make a good husband for anyone? He would, I thought, have made a good husband for me.

"You must get out into the sun more often, Anne," he said. "You look like a fish that has lived in a cave for a hundred years." I was startled and gratified that he had noticed.



"What sun?" I said. "The sun never shines at Rosings."

Once, when I was in London with Mother, I saw a blind man being led by a dog. A black dog, a labrador mostly, and it led him to a street corner where the dog sat, and then the man sat and put his cap on the pavement. The dog lay down beside him, leaning into his ragged coat.

At first, Pug led me. I could not see the door myself. Eventually, I learned to see the shiver, as Mary described it, when it appeared. And eventually, I even learned to summon it—at least, when it wanted to come.

What I liked best was going to Lyme. I would sit on the Cobb, watching the ships come in and the fishermen unloading their nets, the fish gleaming orange and purple in the evening light. The smell of the fish, the smell of the sea, the harsh voices of the fishermen. The feel of rough stone. It was as though I had been transported to fairyland.

I did not like going to London, but the door opens where it wants to. Its intentions are inscrutable, the destination not under our control. And that is where I met the Miss Martins.

They were walking down the street, still with their aprons on, looking into the shop windows as though they had never seen shops filled only with ribbons, or only with ladies' shoes. I knew immediately that they had traveled through the door, as I had. We recognize each other, we travelers through the door.

"Please forgive my forwardness," I said, "but—I am Anne de Bourgh."

It was the first time they had been to London. We went to the Queen's Palace and the park, with its strutting ducks and tubs of orange trees. Mary admired the parterres, which were, she said, "even fancier than at Donwell Abbey," and Eliza laughed at the French fashions. "Imagine," she said, "if I wore that bonnet at home!" We walked down Pall Mall and finally stopped to have cakes at a shop near Marlborough House, although the attendant did not seem to realize we were there. We took what we wanted, and I left some coins on the counter. It was evening and I was trying not to show that I was at the end of my strength when the door appeared again, in the middle of St. James's Square, and took us back to Abbey-Mill Farm. They could see that I was not well, so they made me lie on the sofa and bathed my forehead with rosewater. Then there was the door, right in the parlor wall, and it took me home to Rosings.

"What have you been doing?" asked Dr. Galt. "Running up and down stairs? I told you, my girl, you can live a normal life, but within reason. Whatever you've been doing, you must not do it again." I lay sick in bed all that week, and Miss Jenkinson brought me interminable cups of beef tea. But I had found friends.

We have tried to understand the rules by which the door operates.

It appears and disappears unexpectedly. When we step through it, we do not know where we will be, or how long we will be there. When it comes back for us, it usually takes us home. But not always.

At first, only Mary could see it—and, presumably, Pug. Now we can all see it—as a sort of shiver in the air, as though the brick wall, or hedge, or whatever is behind it, were behind a waterfall.

It does not like to be ignored. If we do not step through it, the door sulks. Sometimes it does not come back for days.

Sometimes, when we call for it to appear, it comes. At other times it will not come, no matter how we call. Sometimes, it will take us where we ask. At other times, it will not. "Door, could you please take us to Pemberley?" has worked in the past, as has "Open, Sesame!" As has "Here, door, door, door!"



The door appears to have limits. We have never traveled earlier than the King's reign, nor later than the defeat of Napoleon. (Imagine our relief to learn of Waterloo.) We have never traveled outside England, although Eliza has asked, again and again, to go to Italy.

Wherever we go, we are ghosts. We walk unnoticed. And when we return, we have not been missed. Life seems to flow around us, as though we were pebbles in a stream, eternally still in the midst of motion. Once, Eliza said, "Is it the door, or is it just us? I can go to Highbury for hours, and when I return Mother says that she thought I was home all the time, in the garden or with the cows. Perhaps we are just like that, going through life unnoticed."

We call it a door, but is it a door at all? We say that it opens, but can what it does be called opening? What happens when it appears? What determines where it will take us? We do not know.

"I think," I said to Mary and Eliza, "that we should begin attempting to summon the door. I believe it has a purpose, and that we must fulfill it."

"What sort of purpose?" asked Mary.

"I believe that we should find others like ourselves. They must exist, and I think the door will take us to them."

We were in Bath, walking along the Crescent. The sun was bright and Mary's nose was beginning to freckle. The door does not wait for one to fetch a parasol.

"You don't know how lonely I was until I met Pug. And if there are others like me, who are also lonely, I want to find them."

I said it with steady conviction, although I was not sure, myself, that the door was not simply a Devil, an impish device that had decided to play with us for a while. But there is something I have wondered since the days of Dr. Templeton and Dr. Bransby, while being lowered into a cold bath or drinking beef tea. Is there a force in the universe that understands us, as we long to be understood? And if so, is this force compassionate? Does it, even as it metes out ill, long for our good? If so, it is the force that will give Fitz the girl he wants, the happy ending he deserves. But what about those of us for whom there can be no happy endings? Perhaps it gives us something else, a secret. A companionship that even Fitz would not understand.

So far, we have only found two others like ourselves, apart from the unfriendly Mrs. Churchill. Mrs. Smith of Allenham Hall, in Derbyshire, is a widow with a heart condition like mine, who cannot travel much. But we go visit her, when the door allows. Mr. Wentworth is a vicar in Shropshire. I said to him once, "It seems, Mr. Wentworth, that you disprove Mary's conjecture. You have a profession. You are married and have children. Surely you are not one of those to whom nothing happens."

"It is true, Miss de Bourgh, that I have more to occupy myself than you do, which precludes me from joining you as often as I would like. But consider, my brother is an admiral in His Majesty's navy. I, too, once longed to become a sailor, but my father destined me for the church. Compared to his, my life is dull indeed."

"Perhaps," said Eliza later, when the three of us were alone, except for Pug, "that is

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the difference between men and women. Mr. Wentworth's life would be considered full, for a woman. And yet he considers it dull."

"I feel for him," I said. "But I confess, I feel more for Mrs. Smith, lying on her sofa all day long."

The first time we walked through the door into her room, kept as dark as mine in the days of Dr. Bransby, she said, "Good dog! You've brought some friends. Sit down, girls, sit down. Stay and talk with me for a while."

This is what Miss Jenkinson tells the tourists as they walk through Rosings. I have heard it so often I could almost recite it myself: Roman foundations, a Saxon fort, given to Sir George de Bourgh by William the Conqueror.

"In the days of Sir Roger de Bourgh, the cellars contained so much port it was said you could sail on it to China. The requirements of the present Lady de Bourgh are considerably more modest." Laughter.

"Under Lady Anne de Bourgh, a portion of the house burned and had to be rebuilt. As we walk through the house, I will point out the various architectural styles. This hall, as you see, is Elizabethan, although after the fire it required extensive restoration. Only one of the walls is original. It was said that Lady Anne set the fire herself after her lover, William d'Arcy, rejected her for the Virgin Queen. At present, Rosings has forty-two bedrooms, a number considered propitious by Sir Roger de Bourgh, who was believed by some to be a mathematician, and by others to be an alchemist. His wife, Arabella d'Arcy, was accused of assisting in his alchemical experiments. Her grandmother, Isabel d'Arcy, who was the mistress of Henry VI, was afterward tried as a witch. There are twelve bathrooms, of which eight have modern plumbing, put in at a cost of over a thousand pounds." Gasps.

"The de Bourghs hold extensive lands in Kent, including this manor and of course the village of Hunsford. In his capacity as magistrate, the late Sir George de Bourgh was responsible for hanging fourteen poachers in one year. Madam, if you could stop your child from kicking that chair. It was presented to Lady Catherine by Queen Charlotte herself. Observe the painting of Sir Edward de Bourgh as a child, which was saved during the Civil War by being buried under a local pigsty."

"Tell us about the Wicked Lord!"

"Edward de Bourgh, the Wicked Lord, as he was called at court, was beheaded for his unwanted attentions to King Charles' mistress, Nell Gwyn . . ."

Pug and I escape to the garden. When we were children, Fitz was made to learn this tale of folly and bloodshed. No wonder he reads German philosophy. The de Bourghs and the d'Arcys: alchemists, rapists, thieves. Let him have his happy ending.

In the garden, I sit on the edge of the fountain, feeding the fish. These are the living fish, imported from China: orange and white, with an exquisite beauty that their stone cousins cannot match. They rise to nibble the bread that I drop for them. Pug puts his front paws on the edge of the fountain, looks at them, and barks.

A woman and a boy come into the garden.

"What a bad boy you are, Tom," she says, sighing and sitting down on one of the benches. "Why did you have to kick the furniture? I can't take you anywhere."

"I'm bored," he says, quite reasonably, in my opinion. "I want to see the secret passage. You said there would be a secret passage."

"Well, there isn't a secret passage. That Jenkins woman said so. Now will you behave yourself?"

I have no more bread. The fish rise to nibble my fingers. Pug barks and barks, and turns to me, panting, for approval. He looks as though he is laughing.

Madam, I want to say, there is a secret passage. Miss Jenkinson cannot show it to you. But there is, there is. ○

This spring has been a great time for Kristine Kathryn Rusch. Her latest Diving Universe novel, *City of Ruins*, came out from Pyr, and Sourcebooks published her latest Kristine Grayson paranormal romance novel, *Wickedly Charming*. In her latest tale for us, Kris turns her attention to the plight of refugees on their desperate way to . . .

# DUNYON

Kristine Kathryn Rusch

It started in the far reaches of the sector—ships firing on each other, some destroyed. Keeping track became hard—communications turned sporadic, and who really followed which government was in charge of what anyway?

Rumors started, rumors impossible to confirm as communications throughout the system grew intermittent. Entire ships, destroyed. Cities, gone. A planet, blown up.

But most people saw no evidence of any of it. One would think, if a planet had been destroyed, there would be some kind of repercussion, but most people knew of none. Most people saw nothing.

Until one day the ships appeared overhead.

Most people barely had time to gather the family and the money, barely had time to get away, to find refugee ships.

But “refugee ships” makes it sound organized, like an effort conducted by some charity organization or a benevolent and surviving government.

The ships weren’t organized or tied to each other or even very similar. Some were old-fashioned generation ships. Some were commandeered space yachts. Some were stolen trading vessels.

They made it only so far. Some refugees died in the blackness of space, the ships powerless, spinning slowly, the only thing surviving an emergency signal that would go forever unheeded.

Other refugees made it to the outer reaches of the sector. To supply stations and military outposts.

And the rest—well, the rest ended up here.

The new arrivals always ask me where here is, and I tell them one of three things, depending on my mood.

*I say, I used to know but I don't any more.*

*Or, It's the end of the line.*

*Or, Here? This isn't a place. It's an emotion.*

But too many asked me what that emotion was.

*Desperation, I'd say. Desperation, pure and simple.*

In truth, “here” was once an outpost, so far on the edge of the sector that we weren’t even sure which government claimed us. Mostly we claimed ourselves. Eventually, we became a destination space station, a haven for the rich. We built fantasy resorts spiraling off the main part of the station—all virtual reality and holo-

graphic technology like nothing else in the sector. If you wanted to be pampered, you came here. If you wanted to redefine yourself, you came here. If you wanted to hide from the public, you came here.

It would cost you more money than most people ever saw, but you came here.

I came here without money twenty years ago. Most women, when they arrived, either dripped money or had unvarnished beauty. I had neither.

I was a former soldier looking for a respite, scarred inside and out. I started as a bartender, and built a reputation as the person who solved everyone else's problems quickly, silently, and efficiently.

I did nothing but work and save and meddle (unemotionally) in other people's lives. So as the station expanded, built its first exclusive wing, I had enough money to build my own bar with my own apartment attached.

I could run things the way that I wanted to, keep the hours that I wanted, let in the clients I wanted.

By being exclusive, I became popular.

And rich.

Nowadays, the bar is still exclusive. We are the only place that still charges a cover. We have entertainment in the back room—usually a band, sometimes a comedian, once in a while an acting troupe—all of them famous, all of them refugees. I pay well. People want to run their show in my place because they like my place.

I have human employees not because I can afford them (of course I can) but because I'm trying to create jobs so that fewer people remain stuck in the refugee areas, the places we called the pens. So far, I've created twenty-five jobs, and I'm thinking of expanding.

I've already expanded more than I initially planned. In addition to my entertainment room, I have a high stakes poker room. No one gets in without a fifty thousand minimum. I raised the stakes when I learned the truly desperate were taking the last of their savings and trying to double their money on my tables.

I didn't want to get rich by making desperate people poor.

In the main room, we serve dinner at eight sharp. When the five courses are over, we clear the tables and serve drinks until four AM.

At four, I shut down everything except the high stakes poker (some games can go on for days) and wander the halls, looking at the decay. The hotels that once catered to the dilettantes are now filled to capacity with the rich and desperate. The restaurants serve food to the people who pay up front. But their doors are all closed when I wander. I see the signs for specials or warning the people from the pens to stay out. Sometimes I see evidence of a scuffle—broken chairs, smashed tables, a hastily made "closed for the week" sign.

The only places still open when I close the bar are the information kiosks. They have no employees, so people can use them at any time. Even at four in the morning, I will pass lines in front of the kiosks, lines that extend through dozens of corridors.

Information. That's where the premium is. People want to know if their home is still there, if members of their family are still alive, when (if ever) they can return. Most never let go of the past, unable to accept they're in a new future, one they don't recognize.

I barely recognize it, and I have little to hang onto. But I see patterns. For example, you can always tell which part of the sector is closed or ruined or under attack because the information stops flowing from there. What replaces information is rumor.

Rumor. This place thrives on rumor. You can hear it as you walk through the corridors, going from the old resort section (now part of the pens) to the condo wing to my little neighborhood of exclusivity. You hear it in the lowered voices, see it in the furtive looks. You know that someone is lying to someone else, maybe not intentionally, but always harmfully.

For the rumors are almost always harmful. They give hope where there is none. And I think that's the most destructive of all.

Last month, I finally became a victim of rumors. The whispers, the looks, all came toward me, and I had no idea what was causing them.

My bartender brought me the first hint. He used the silent call built into the back bar to bring me down from my office on the second floor.

The bar in the main room is spectacular. I designed it for looks as well as ease for the bartender. I insist on a human bartender, not some robotic mixer or automated machine. There's an art to mixing cocktails—the right amount of this touched with a splash of that—that machines can never get right.

The bar circles around a blue screen that shows flat images of anywhere in the sector. Usually I set the imagery, and I try to keep current: any place that's considered safe shows up on the image screen, and any place that might have exploded out of existence gets removed from the rotation.

In front of the imagery stand bottles of real alcohol, most of them imported. The bulk of my real alcohol is stored in a safe room off-premises. Only I know where that safe room is because now, much of the real alcohol is more valuable than jewelry or credits or any other commodity except food. Some of those liquors aren't ever going to be made any more, and the fifteen bottles in my storeroom are the fifteen last known bottles in the sector, maybe even the universe.

I price accordingly.

Between the bar and the back bar is a floor so springy that you can stand on it all day and your legs don't ache. Customers sit on high stools that gradually tilt if the bartender decides the customer is sucking too much air. Obnoxious people leave quickly. Pleasant ones stay so long, they often fall asleep with their heads on my well-polished bar.

The bartender, Jack Kunitz, had moved to the very edge of the bar when he saw me. He was a burly man with a history as checkered as mine. He dreamed of opening his own bar one day—or he used to, before all of this.

He was polishing glasses with a special bar rag, even though we had a machine for that.

"See that woman?" he asked softly, nodding at the other side of the bar.

I could barely see her. The bar was shaped like a giant C, and she was in the middle of the opposite curve. Slender, older, rich. Rich was easy to tell because her clothes fit, she looked well nourished, and she still wore expensive rings on her long, thin fingers.

"Yeah?" I asked.

"She wants to know how much passage is," he said.

"Passage?" I asked. "To where?"

"Dunyon," he said.

"Dunyon?" I repeated. I had never heard of it. I thought I had heard of every damn place. "Where the hell is that?"

He shrugged. "I asked her. She said it was somewhere far from here. Somewhere safe."

"Why is she asking us for passage?" I asked.

"Dunno," he said. "I asked her. She said I should know. So I called you."

Sometimes I had special information. Or a ticket someone lost at a high stakes game for an expensive berth on a ship leaving from here, usually somewhere far away. Maybe not somewhere safer, but somewhere different.

After you've been here for a while, after you've finally accepted that your home is gone, you have no family left, and nothing is ever going to be as it was, you go somewhere else, figuring you'll start new, figuring you have at least a fighting chance of rebuilding some kind of life.

At least, that's what these people tell me when they spend thousands—sometimes tens of thousands—for the chance to get the hell out of here.

"I don't know a thing about Dunyon," I said. "Apologize and tell her to check her source."

He did, and she left, and I gave it no more thought until the next night when three more people—obviously wealthy—offered a small fortune to buy their way to Dunyon. And the following night, six offered. By the next night, twenty-five.

The amount of money was staggering. The number of people willing to pay it was growing by the hour.

I needed to find out what Dunyon was, and I needed to find out fast.

Believe it or not, bartenders—bar owners—don't always have the latest information. I don't believe rumor and innuendo, and while I have a few trusted sources, I only trust them on matters pertaining to the station and my operator's license. Anything else is suspect.

So at times like this, I have to use an information kiosk like everyone else. Before everything went to hell, I could access information from my apartment. But that avenue got shut off as the pens grew larger and larger. First people hacked into our personal systems, and then the information got corrupted. That made the kiosks the only safe place for news.

The kiosks were tapped into the station's space monitoring system. Information from ships approaching and leaving, from other systems, and from various networks filtered through the monitoring system. If its information were wrong, the station would soon cease to exist.

The kiosks were designed so that no one could tap into that system, and anyone who tried to modify the kiosks' security was arrested and often never heard from again.

I paid one of the cocktail waitresses to stand in line for me. Poor thing, she waited for eight hours before she contacted me. She was three people from the kiosk door. I still didn't hurry down. Three people, at a minimum, would take twenty minutes to finish their business.

I made it to the kiosk in fifteen. Still two people away. The waitress looked exhausted.

"Next time," she said. "Get someone else to stand for you. I'd rather be moving than standing still."

I nodded, thanked her, and waited another fifteen minutes before getting into the kiosk myself.

The kiosks were ten feet tall and seven feet wide. They were oblong, with doors on two sides. The person accessing information went in one door while the person who had just finished with the kiosk went out the other.

As the doors slid, the kiosk wiped its memory, so that the newcomer would face a blank screen.

At least, that was the theory. More than once, I'd seen what the person before me had been searching for. Mostly, those searches didn't concern me—a name I had never heard before, a place I was only vaguely conscious of—but the searches almost always ended with a red no-longer-viable notice.

My searches were few and far between. Mostly they pertained to specialized booze or a particular type of glassware. This was the first search I would ever make for a place.

The kiosk doors slid closed simultaneously and the side lighting came on, faint but illuminating. The flat screen in front of me had its own back light. If I wanted a holographic avatar that would talk me through various programs, I had to turn around and deal with the other screen.



I interacted with people more than enough. I didn't need a fake person to walk me through programming.

So I asked the screen in front of me about Dunyon and got this response back:

*Which Dunyon?*

Which Dunyon indeed? I had no idea. But I couldn't tell an information kiosk that.

"Dunyon," I repeated. "The one that's far from here. And safe."

*You are the six hundredth person to enquire about that Dunyon on this station in the past week, the system informed me. I have no Dunyon that fits such parameters.*

"How about a place called Dunyon within travel distance from this station?" I asked.

*I have no Dunyon that fits those parameters either, the system informed me. You are asking questions in the same pattern as four-hundred-and-eighty other inquirers. Would you like the remaining questions and answers?*

I didn't like being told I was unoriginal, but I did appreciate the shortened workload. I told the system yes, and let it inform me that there was no place called Dunyon in the known universe, that there was no place with alternate spellings or pronunciations of Dunyon in the known universe, and no place called Dunyon on any shipping lanes.

"No place nicknamed Dunyon?" I asked.

No, the system told me, and then informed me that I was starting down a line of questioning that 365 people had followed. I got their results as well.

So far as we could tell—all of us who inquired on this system—Dunyon did not exist.

Then I remembered the system's initial response to my very first question.

"When I inquired about Dunyon," I said, "you asked me to clarify. You said, which Dunyon? Which implies that there are several Dunyons. What are they?"

*Dunyon, the system responded. An ancient family of hereditary rulers on Uteelly. The family was assassinated several thousand years ago. Uteelly was destroyed in the latest wars, along with all cities and landmarks named after the family Dunyon.*

I wondered if that was the source of my rumor and was about to ask when the system continued.

*Dunyon, it said. A mythological city in the Koppae Sector. A place that may or may not have existed. Thought to be the perfect city. The hereditary family Dunyon of Uteelly claimed to be the only survivors of Dunyon, although this is unproven. There is no evidence that this Dunyon ever existed.*

But it sounded like my Dunyon, the place far from here, the place that was safe. In these troubled times, "safe" was better than perfect or idyllically beautiful.

I frowned. There was a long silence, and I realized that the system had finished its recitation.

"When did you get your first query about Dunyon?" I asked.

*Seven days ago.*

"Did that query fit into any of the patterns of inquiry you mentioned before?"

No.

"What did that questioner want to know?" I asked.

*Personal inquiries are protected information, the system said, rather primly it seemed to me.*

"Did I ask any of the same questions as the original inquirer?" I asked.

No, the system said.

I felt frustrated. I couldn't find out where this information had originated, but it had clearly originated here on this station one week before.

"Did I receive any of the same answers as the other questioner?" I asked.

No, the system said.

I thought for a moment. Then I tried one last question. "Has anyone thought they've found the lost city of Dunyon?"

*Time parameters?*

Time parameters? It took me a moment to understand that. "When did that Dunyon disappear?"

*Sixteen centuries ago.*

"Has anyone thought they've found the lost city of Dunyon in the past three hundred years?"

I chose the number three hundred randomly. I could have chosen five hundred or even the full sixteen hundred. But I wanted some inkling of what was happening recently.

*Seventy-five explorers believed they found Dunyon. But they could not find it a second time.*

I recognized this myth. It had existed throughout human history. The vanishing city. The perfect city that you could only visit once.

"Has anyone found the lost city of Dunyon in the past fifty years?"

*Lucas Ennelly found the lost city of Dunyon fifteen years ago.*

"Where is Lucas Ennelly now?" I asked.

I got the red screen. Lucas Ennelly was no longer viable. Even though I expected something like that, I still felt discouraged. I could understand why most people fled the kiosk upon getting such news.

"When did Lucas Ennelly die?" I asked.

*Eight days ago*, the system told me.

My stomach clenched. I was on to something.

"Where?" I asked, even though I had a hunch I knew.

*In a bar on this station*, the system told me.

"Which bar?" I asked. I knew what the system would tell me. I really didn't have to wait for the words, although I did.

My bar. Lucas Ennelly died in my bar, eight days ago.

The day before the woman arrived, asking about Dunyon.

People die in my bar all the time. That's part of the new reality. No one has the money to do simple things, like eat properly or see doctors when they get ill. The pens are breeding grounds for all kinds of viruses, and no one is allowed to leave if they're sick.

But that doesn't always stop people. Nor do they benefit from the constant stress and worry. Heart attacks, once thought to be eradicated, are common now, along with strokes. Experts are saying that it is the stress that kills, but I think it's a broken heart.

Lucas Ennelly passed out at the bar, not far from where that woman sat. By the time we realized he wasn't a passed-out drunk, it was too late. He had stopped breathing an hour before.

I'm not held liable for such things, just like I'm not held liable for the attacks and the attempted murders that go on just outside. People have become hostile. They drink too much and get too angry.

I'm always happy when they pass out. I prefer to let them rest there, since God knows, they probably don't get rest anywhere else.

Jake contacted authorities when we realized Ennelly was dead. One of the station's six coroners eventually removed the body, and—I'm sorry to say—that was the last thought we had given him, if we had given him one before that.

I was giving him a lot of thought now. I had the system tell me all it could about Lucas Ennelly. Turned out he was taking funds from people—the money the woman had quoted to us—for safe passage to Dunyon. He had already made a down payment on a retrofitted generation ship. He was going to take everyone to a place he had only seen once.

And they were willing to believe him. I left the kiosk, and reported his scheme to the authorities. If things went well, they might find some of Ennelly's funds and re-

turn them to the poor unsuspecting souls who had invested so much for escape to a mythical realm.

If things went the way they normally did, some low-grade bureaucrat would find the money, pocket it, and claim that Ennelly had spent it all.

I couldn't worry about it.

I had to figure out how to keep Ennelly's clients from coming to my bar.

I walked back. I didn't usually have time off during the day and it was an odd treat to see people in the corridors, to see the full restaurants, and the back-and-forth of commerce, even if it was conducted furtively and with great desperation.

By the time I got back to my exclusive neighborhood, I was relieved. I was tired of the crowds, the grasping, the clawing, the questioning looks from faces shoved against mine. I had gotten used to the late night silence as well as the order I kept inside my own bar.

I preferred it.

I wasn't going to get it, however.

Because as I got close, I heard shouting. Then I saw dozens and dozens of people, pressing against the bar's entrance. A mob, screaming, pulling, punching. The windows looking into the corridor were already broken and people were pouring inside.

I had never seen such chaos at my place—or even in this neighborhood. I grabbed one man and pulled him back.

"What's going on?"

"Free tickets to Dunyon to the first five hundred people!" he yelled back, then pulled away from me.

I stood there, breathless, as more and more people hurried toward my bar. None were well dressed. They all smelled like sweat and unwashed clothes.

People from the pens, running toward free tickets.

I scrambled away, heading to the side of the bar. The employee entrance was hidden. Only an employee's DNA made it visible, and no one else's. I made sure I wasn't followed before I touched the wall, which opened for me and let me slide inside.

Inside wasn't much better. People crowded the main room. The images behind the bar were shut off, and it took me a moment to realize why. Someone had broken the screen. Bright light shone from it onto the floor above.

Jake was standing behind the bar, protecting the expensive liquors with some kind of unauthorized weapon. The cocktail waitress who had helped me was keeping people back with the broken edge of a bottle.

I didn't see any other employees, but I glanced up. The doors to the back rooms were closed and locked. Someone had the presence of mind to seal off the entertainment area and the high stakes poker room.

The noise was deafening. I pressed the emergency call button beside the employee entrance and got a green light, which meant help was on the way.

Although I wasn't sure what the authorities could do, except stun the rioters and maybe hurt regular patrons inside my bar.

I pushed my way to the bar proper, then climbed on top of it. I waved my hands, but nothing happened.

So I shouted, "I'm the owner of this bar!"

The people in front of me stopped yelling and pushing.

I shouted the same thing again, and again until the entire room was quiet.

Now I had to tell them something. I could have said the authorities were coming and they would all be arrested, but that probably wouldn't counteract the concept of a free ticket.

I had to be creative.

I had to let them think they were getting what they wanted.

"Thank you all for coming," I said, hoping I sounded sincere. "It's been a great promotion. Lucas Ennelly gave us tickets to Dunyon and I'm proud to tell you that we have just given the last one away. Congratulations to all the winners!"

I clapped my hands, as if I were congratulating someone. Jack watched me for a minute as if I had lost my mind, then he started clapping too. The cocktail waitress slapped one hand against the neck of the broken bottle.

A few confused people up front peered at me, but people behind them started to clap. And so did everyone else.

They were so used to losing, so used to being the ones who did *not* get the special treatment, that they weren't angry when they realized the tickets they had come for were gone. They accepted the loss as one more in a series of losses. They pretended joy for my so-called winners, and then they slowly, calmly, filed out.

No one remained except Jake, the cocktail waitress, and one of our regulars, who had clung to his seat at the bar through it all.

"What the hell was that?" Jake asked.

"I know how the rumor started," I said, and told him about Lucas Ennelly. "He really was selling tickets to Dunyon from this bar for a lot of money."

"A scam," the waitress said.

"Most likely," I said. Then I shrugged. "But people who claimed they found the lost city of Dunyon always tried to go back. I think he was using these poor people to fund his trip."

"I don't get it," Jake said. He set his weapon in a drawer behind the bar that I had forgotten about. "Why come in greater numbers after he died?"

"Two reasons, I think," I said. "First, people *had* bought tickets here. And second, deaths don't get publicized on the station. No one knew he was dead."

"So they thought he was holding out on them," the cocktail waitress said.

I nodded. "Which only made them more desperate."

I didn't have to explain the rest to them. Because they live here and they know: Desperation leads to rumors and rumors become wild stories, and wild stories ignite belief. People are taking action on the smallest things, the most unlikely things, because they need something—anything—to cling to.

I've seen it countless times.

I just hadn't experienced it myself.

Until then.

The authorities arrived too late to do anything. We were already sweeping up the mess, replacing the broken tables with others from our back rooms, and scrambling to find more chairs.

I didn't even file a complaint, because who was there to complain against? God? The universe? The random unfairness of the conflicts we all found ourselves in?

So I had some damage and I lost some money. I consider myself one of the lucky ones. I have a place. I am here on purpose, not because I have nowhere else to go.

Unlike most of the people outside my doors, I am not desperate.

Not yet.

Although I feel the press of humanity with the arrival of each new ship filled with refugees, as the pens grow bigger and the crowds more unruly.

At some point, there won't be incidents any more, sparked by rumors, fed by hopelessness.

At some point, it really will be us against them.

And we will lose.

Because there are too many of them, desperate and terrified. And there are too few of us, pretending that civilization will go on.

Even when there is no real civilization left. ○

# E

R. M. Kaye

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loop infinity

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creases

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fractures

froths

multiple spaces

overload

energy strings

writhe

force

loop seething swarms

opposites annihilate

vacuum space frames

energy surges

gush through nine dimensions

shrink-seal six

settle in three

uncertainly

everywhere

particle waves

blend

radiate

everywhen

wave particles emerge

forces force-click quanta

clump grainily

bloat bound bubbles

everywhere  
branes bind in  
gravitons gravitate  
converge, cohere, adhere, conflate, contract  
isolate  
shine  
glimmering solar systems  
glowing spiral galaxies  
wink on and off  
in bubble spheres adrift  
on streaming currents  
of dark energy

generations of supernova suns  
forge and reforge elements  
waft in solar winds  
acid  
base  
mineral  
metal  
react  
in amniotic pools  
cells absorb  
swirl  
divide  
attract  
harvest light



develop  
envelop  
sequence alimentary organs  
gorge  
excrete  
become aware  
flee  
congregate, communicate, multiply  
grow  
old  
die  
decompose

slime washes ashore  
clumps spawn and cling  
string upon string  
forms shapes  
shapes forms  
breathes  
mutates  
metamorphoses  
slithers, crawls, hobbles, hops, lopes  
rises  
and sniffs at stars  
with a lens

then somewhere  
here and there  
everywhere  
glitches unglitch  
infinity loop unloops  
telomere strings unravel  
organic sequences unorganize  
elemental grips ungrip  
material forces unforce  
elements unclick  
quantum grid reconfigures  
quanta unbuzz  
infinity reboots finitely  
gravity ungravitates  
integrations unintegrate  
suns unshine  
shadows unshade  
solar systems unwind  
galaxies unswirl  
forms unappear  
shapes unshape  
multiple spaces uninflate  
dimensions unbend  
unbuckle  
unrend  
uncrink  
uncrease  
unfracture  
resingularize  
infinity  
 $mc^2 = E$

# THE MUSIC OF THE SPHERE

Norman Spinrad

Norman Spinrad splits his time between Paris and New York, though *Police State*, the novel he's currently working on, is set in New Orleans. His last novel, *Welcome to Your Dreamtime*, is set entirely in the dreamtime of you, the reader. Norman's most recently published novel *Osama the Gun* has only appeared in France. His latest American publication, *He Walked Among Us*, came out last year from Tor Books. The author's new story, "The Music of the Sphere," was inspired by his experience as a cyborged vocalist with the band Heldon, and his long-time affectionate fascination with dolphins, whales, and their sonar sensoriums.

In the 1960s there was a band called Blue Cheer whose claim to be the loudest rock and roll band on the planet went unchallenged. They would play in intimate club venues standing right next to the same monster speakers used in stadiums. They were so loud that many aficionados of their recorded music fled in physical agony from live performances.

Mario Roca wasn't even born then, and their recorded music he found primitive and tedious, but he was fascinated by the legend and he had heard that there had been more obscure bands who had brought jet engines on stage just for the decibel count.

But why would audiences and the musicians themselves court deafness to experience it, even when the music itself was mediocre at best? Perhaps *especially* when the music was mediocre or worse. What was the appeal of bad music played so loud that it was an excruciation to the ear? What secret was buried in the wall of noise?

One could, of course, define loud mathematically by decibel count, and one could define it physiologically by what human eardrums or even nervous systems could or could not bear, and the militaries had sonic weapons that took effective advantage of this principle.

But this was noise, unmodulated chaotic white noise, not music. The goal was pain, not pleasure.

Mario Roca was an electronic composer and musician. Who wouldn't be, when any sound made by any analog instrument that had ever existed, and an infinity of others that hadn't, could be either sampled and edited or synthesized from whole electronic cloth? They could be perfectly reproduced in their full subtleties and glories, and laid out on a keyboard, up to and including a Stradivarius violin, an African

talking drum, an antique Gibson guitar, or for that matter full symphony orchestras of a single composer-musician's own creation.

Was Mario Roca a popular musician, an avant-garde musician, or a classical musician? As far as he and his audiences were concerned, the distinctions were meaningless, except, of course, in Roca's bank account.

By that definition, by what he commanded for performances, by his download sales figures, Mario Roca was a *popular* musician; not quite a pop *star*, but far from feeling any economic pain. He was an avant-garde musician if one defined avant-garde as always seeking to push the edges of all possible musical envelopes, and some that hovered on the other side of possibility for the moment.

But he was a classical musician in the sense that he believed that music should be beautiful, should be pleasurable, should resonate positively with the human spirit, should not assault it with atonal noise in the name of theory, and that in some way that he did not yet entirely understand, the western musical scale, with its chords and harmonies, be it "longhair," "rock," "country," "reggae," whatever, as well as time-mellowed Indian, African, and Arabic musical structures, when successfully performed, resonated synergistically with an elusive something in the depths of the human psyche to produce that aesthetic and spiritual ecstasy.

As far as he was concerned, any so-called "music" that didn't was noise.

If he could somehow learn *why* this was so, he should be awarded the unfortunately non-existent Nobel Prize for Music. And somehow, he believed, he intuited, that understanding the mysterious appeal of even subsonic loud music beyond the range of the human ear, if it was at least true musical loudness, meaning harmonic and not a sonic weapon even if it threatened the eardrums, was the key.

Caroline Koch would not quite admit that she *loved* cetaceans—whales, dolphins, orcas—though she was generally acknowledged as the human species' top expert on the clade. But she was certainly obsessed by them, and in love with their reality, even before she made her conceptual breakthrough.

For the better part of a century humans had been trying to communicate with these beings who shared the Earth with them and whose brains matched their own in complexity and in some species exceeded them in size, who sang long complex songs that mutated with their tribal affiliations, who stuck their heads up above the water to chatter at them in what seemed a shared frustration.

Trying to teach them intermediary languages based on phonemes humans could hear. Processing their supersonic sounds down into the humanly audible to decode them into languages, to seek out a cetacean-human Rosetta Stone. Taking LSD with them in isolation tanks to commune on some mystical level beyond language.

Nada. Rien de tout. Complete failure.

Until Caroline Koch had her satori.

She was watching a mediocre 3D movie at the time when it hit her.

*This* was the reality of the cetaceans, or anyway a pale shadow thereof.

No one had ever decoded a cetacean language and no one ever would, because there wasn't any. There wasn't any because cetaceans didn't need any. They had something much better.

Everyone knew that whales, orcas, dolphins, had "sonar sight" like bats, like human radar, bouncing beamed sonic signals around their watery environment, and "seeing" by what came back from where—moving pictures of their environment similar, and indeed superior to, what humans perceived via reflected light.

The sounds they made weren't language.

They were a kind of sonic *television*. They sent out sounds and "saw" by what bounced back.

Better than human sight or hearing, which relied on organs that were passive receivers, this was an *active* sense. That projected as well as received. And that was why no cetacean language had ever been parsed, why they didn't need one, why, if they actually understood, they must pity humans.

They could *project* real-time moving images as well as receive. If a dolphin detected a shark, it didn't have to shriek "shark" in some language, it could broadcast the sonic image thereof directly.

And if cetaceans could do that, could they not project the image of a shark when none was present? And if they could do *that*, could they not converse with each other directly in 3D imagery, tell stories, create epics?

Were not the whale sounds far more than songs?

Were they not 3D moving pictures?

The more advanced military sonic weapons projected aharmonically mixed frequencies—noise—higher than the human range of hearing to torture their victims with pain. Mario Roca had also heard that there was something called the Panic Frequency, 14 cycles per second, just *below* the range of human hearing and off-key, which supposedly induced panic in crowds and may have already been used to do so, if you believed the right conspiracy theory.

Mario Roca had no interest in sonic weapons or conspiracy theories, but upon reflection in his studio in the bleary hours before dawn, he had an epiphany that, once realized, had been hidden in plain sight all along.

Inaudible sounds could have drastic effects on the human nervous system, psyche, even spirit if you were a musician and credited such a level. Loud inaudible high-frequency noise could bring humans screaming and puking to their knees. The inaudible off-key low-frequency panic note could turn them into fleeing lemmings.

These were not exactly the effect that he was after.

But what if you produced inaudible low-frequency *music*? Meaning subaudible notes and chords, or even interweaving fugal themes that harmonized and were on key?

Easy enough to do with modern musical technology. Mario Roca quickly recorded a tune in the key of middle C, somehow always the natural default. Even the great twentieth century songwriter Cole Porter never learned to do anything else, and left transcriptions to other keys to the arrangers.

Mario Roca had no interest at the moment in playing with such key transcriptions, though his software could have done it all in seconds. He simply used the same software to drop his composition written for middle C five octaves down, well beneath the threshold of audibility to humans.

That much was child's play.

Playing it back was something else again. He had the best amps and speakers short of football stadium gear, but even that would not have been adequate to play it back. Five octaves down from middle C meant ultra-low-frequency wavefronts, and that meant very long waves indeed. Which required huge speakers and the power to vibrate their diaphragms. He now seemed to understand what Blue Cheer had been fruitlessly and frustratingly about—even their speaker system would not have been able to play back this silent music.

But this was decades later, and although Mario Roca was a thoroughly electronic musician, he was still a *musician*, not a sound engineer. If Cole Porter could leave the equivalent of such grubby details to human arrangers, surely he could leave the latter day version to their latter day versions, the sound engineers.

So he brought his tune five octaves up again to middle C and transformed it into a four-part fugue for electronically synthesized and tweaked organ, acoustic bass, rock

guitar, and sitar, dropped it back down to five octaves below middle C, and decided to call it *The Music of Silence*.

Caroline Koch had enough grant money to hire a small team of computer geeks to transpose cetacean ultrasound images into visual images of a kind, no sweat, they told her, once you knew that images, not language, were what you were looking for and had figured out the correct pixel pattern of the raster.

Caroline Koch's lab was located on the California coast between Santa Barbara and San Francisco, where she could study dolphins in the wet and wild without having to hold them in captivity except for special purposes, and where, in season, she could do likewise with the migrating gray whales. This not being the whale season, what had been recorded and decoded was dolphin sonic traffic.

When they played back that first video, it was both a breathtaking marvel, and something of a disappointment, though in retrospect one she should have anticipated.

The disappointment was that the images were in black and white. They couldn't even give her false color like weather satellite imagery, because "sonic vision" by its very nature could not distinguish light and hue variation. The dolphin eye could, but the "melon," the sonar receiver, could not. All sonic vision was inherently color-blind.

The marvel of it, though, more than made up for the lack of color.

The motion pictures, the video, the non-verbal non-language communication packets of the dolphins were not only 3D, they were *penetrative*, like ultrasound imagery, like X-rays, like CAT scans.

Dolphins swam and cavorted hither and yon, and while their bodies were in black and white, they were *transparent* to each other's sonic vision. Their skeletons, their internal organs, their last meals, the very feces forming in their digestive tracts, were visibly suspended within their fleshly envelopes like fruit salad embedded in pearl gray Jell-O. And likewise the innards of the schools of fish they hunted and devoured, of passing sea otters, even of swimming humans.

And of a huge great white shark with a half-digested seal in its gut whose image was passed around and repeated among the members of the pod like a set of reflections in a hall of mirrors, as they watched each other flee and circle the creature in something like a taunting undersea ballet.

Which was beautiful, marvelous, but also mysteriously odd.

Because as far as Caroline Koch knew, and she knew this territory quite well, there were no great whites anywhere near these waters.

The sound engineers were easily enough able to *design* speakers that could vibrate five octaves down from middle C all right; in fact they had fun with the fantasy, believing that fantasy it would remain, like Frank Lloyd Wright's fantasy blueprints for a mile-high skyscraper.

The speakers wouldn't have to be 5,000 feet high and wide, a mere 200 feet would do, hah, hah, hah, but the amps that powered them would have to be built around the kind of cryogenically cooled superconductive electromagnets used in advanced atom smashers, or they would suck up enough electricity to black out the entire west coast grid.

You could do it, all right, if you could pay for it, hah, hah, hah!

Having found the key to entrée into the sonic conversational realm of the dolphins on an imagery level, Caroline Koch set about trying to make "grammatical" sense of it before attempting to join in.

This was more difficult than she had imagined. It was easy enough to get what the dolphins were perceiving in real-time and retelling each other. Moving images of tasty fish schools, followed by coordinated preying behavior. Suggestive sexual invi-



tations that were accepted or declined. Births and deaths. The comings and goings of the bottoms of boats and the placements of fishing nets to be avoided.

But at least half of the traffic seemed to have no reference to anything in their otherwise observable real-time realm, and was much more complex, to the point of chaotic incomprehensibility.

Almost.

Watery dolphin dances about the great crystalline roots of icebergs morphing into majestic copulations of mighty blue whales, battles with pods of orcas playing the fools such creatures were not, what seemed like speeded-up lifetime biographies of individuals being born and nursed, feeding and making love, dying, even assignations with female human swimmers, and often enough all of it interrupting threads as if competing for status, or interweaving harmonically like Bach fugues.

Scientifically and intellectually incomprehensible to the human psyche, and yet so attractive somehow that Caroline Koch found herself watching it for hours and hours beyond such thoughts, beyond thought itself, immersed in . . . immersed in . . .

Immersed in its *beauty*.

And finally she emerged from one of these séances with an insight that made what Saul experienced on the road to Tarsus seem like a minor revelation.

It was *invented* imagery.

No wonder the cetaceans had never developed language! Human language was a pale shadow of this mode of communication. This was fiction and visual fantasy, dance to inaudible music, biography and pornography, comedy and tragedy.

It was *art*.

"You're out of your mind, Mario," was the unanimous response from the suits and bankers whenever Mario Roca pitched the project. "A budget that would bankrupt a Third World banana republic to finance a live performance of something that no one can hear and can't be marketed on any recording medium because not even a stadium system could play it back? Where's the payback?"

"We could tour it with our own sound system . . ."

"Tour *what*? We'd have to tour it for a year at primo ticket prices just to break even, and why would anyone shell out a grand just for a cheap seat for a live performance of something they can't even hear?"

"For the *experience*."

"*What* experience?"

"We can't know until we do it, now can we?" was Mario Roca's standard but heartfelt response that unanimously went over like a fart in a flower shop. "This is *really* experimental music."

Technically speaking, actively entering the dolphin discourse was no big problem. Once dolphin ultrasound imagery had been decoded into human visible television, the code being already cracked, it was easy enough to reverse the process and code human visible television imagery into dolphin ultrasound imagery.

But just as dolphin ultrasound imagery was color blind, what Caroline Koch could send back was all surface, not penetrative, and, she suspected, therefore something like a chimpanzee talking to humans via touch-screen icons in terms of sophistication from a dolphin viewpoint.

She sent video of dolphin pods, which attracted attention, but what came back was what seemed like deliberately crude imagery of *her* footage transformed into grossly explicit 3D penetrative cetacean orgies. Sincere prurient invitation, or the dolphin version of dirty jokes?

When Caroline Koch sent real-time video of herself, she got back her own body

stripped naked to the organs diving through the air-ocean interface and swimming toward the stationary pod.

She tried stock footage of many humans swimming with dolphins, and what was returned was breathtakingly beautiful bi-species ballet, dolphins and humans dancing harmonically to unheard music, morphing into something that would have turned both Busby Berkley and Rudolf Nureyev green with envy, with her own naked avatar cavorting with perfect grace among them.

Eventually, dolphins began to take a shared lead, clearly, or so it seemed to her, trying as hard as she was to establish rapport, some kind of true communication.

Atrocity images of dolphins entangled in drag nets from the delphine perspective, replete with penetrative visions of their lungs flooding and their suffocating organs deteriorating, to which Caroline Koch could frame no decent response. Lovely footage of the wildlife flitting about a tropical reef that she answered with hummingbirds and rain forest top canopy footage. Delphine births and human births. Dolphins swimming with sea otters among the waving fronds of an underwater kelp forest, humans strolling through deep woods with their dogs.

All this seemed to be some kind of communication or esthetic interchange, which, she suspected, amounted to the same thing for the dolphins, but Caroline Koch had no coherent notion of *what* she was trying to communicate to them, let alone what they were trying to communicate to her, save perhaps both of them simply trying to say this is *our* world, show us *yours*.

Or just perhaps this is *our* world together.

Caroline Koch, scientist, knew all too well this was unprofessional anthropomorphizing bordering on tree-hugging pathetic fallacy, but still . . .

Could they understand it? She didn't know. But she was an *experimental* scientist, was she not? It was worth a try.

Best to try it from their world on up. Kelp forests, coral reefs, teeming with aquatic life, fish, sea otters, seals, dolphins themselves soaring and dancing through them. The surface of the ocean seen from above, with dolphins breaching, leaping, whirling in the air, splashing back beneath the sea in fountains of foam.

That much the dolphins experienced themselves directly, and Caroline Koch had already shown them woods and rain forest footage of the human realm, which she now replayed, reinforcing the message, or so she hoped, by quick intercuts of recorded delphine videos of their own realm.

Nothing came back, as if creatures struggling to understand the meaning were eagerly waiting for her to go on.

So she did. The surface of the sea as the viewpoint majestically rose, revealing the subtle curve of the planet. The same thing, but over a continental land mass. And then the famous Big Blue Marble image of the Earth as captured by astronauts on the Moon. Animation of the planet slowly revolving in the black sea of space, dwindling away into one more point of light all but lost in a brilliant starscape.

And then Caroline Koch stopped and waited. It seemed like an eternity before a response finally came, and when it did . . .

Underwater video of a continental shelf dropping off into the deep abyss, with immense shadowy motions on the edge of perception, many, many pods of dolphins, circling, waiting, summoning spirits from the equally vasty deeps, or so it seemed to Caroline Koch.

And they did come when the dolphins called. Whales, a great river of whales rising majestically from the deeps, a parade, a promenade of whales, such as the oceans had not and could not ever really see. Gray whales. Sperm whales. Right whales. Cachelots and baleens. Species who had never swum together. The whales of the world. And among them the blue whales, the greatest creatures Planet Earth had

ever spawned, the grandfather and grandmother monarchs of the seven seas. Of the world entire, as far as the dolphins were clearly telling her.

For one thing was quite clear.

This could not possibly be reportage. This could only be art.

And as if to drive it home, the transmission began to throb, to oscillate at a very slow and very long rhythm, like a slow-motion tsunami circling the globe, like a majestic sine wave a thousand miles from end to end arising from the deeps.

And then the whales were riding it like surfers far beneath the surface of the sea, indeed not far above the sea bottom itself. And then it seemed that the whales themselves were transmitting, in unison, in chorus. Whether this dark and curved landscape was the bottom of the seas as perceived by the whales, or their sonic vision thereof as received and retransmitted, or the artistic interpretation of their songs by the dolphins, was impossible to tell.

The abyssal landscape itself throbbed in locked harmony with the slow majestic beat of the oscillating transmission carrying it. Whales, dolphins, schools and shoals of fish, swam along it, above it, far above it, a long subtle sine wave tide of life, rising and falling almost imperceptibly. And then an image of this flow of the oscillating aquatic biosphere reduced to tiny abstraction as it circled the rocky globe of the Earth that lay beneath the sea.

They knew! Somehow the whales, and the dolphins through them, knew that the world was a sphere. That much was stunningly clear. That much humans also knew. But it also seemed clear to Caroline Koch that these cetacean intelligences, these cetacean spirits, were trying to tell her something that humans did not know. And what it was she could not understand. And wondered if humans ever could.

Mario Roca decided that there was nothing for it but to go public. Maybe there could be a series of foundation grants. Maybe the military would see some unpleasant use for the system needed to play *The Music of Silence*. Maybe some studio would see a movie in it. Maybe, maybe, maybe.

So he made the rounds of the talk show circuit. He already had some access as a fairly well-known composer and musician, and he *could* play *The Music of Silence* transposed up into middle C. And once the story behind it made the supermarket press beside Hollywood scandals and two-headed pigs, he had ready access to one or two levels below the top.

It was about ten minutes or so before the next guest got to spiel.

And this time the next guest was the famous marine biologist Caroline Koch. He had heard of Koch and her breakthrough with the dolphins. Who hadn't, if vaguely? It was a cause celebre, if truth be told, a couple of levels above his own. He watched the footage she had brought with her diffidently, in fact not without a certain picquish envy.

Until she ran the whale song sequence and he found himself tapping his forefinger in time to the oscillation of the video images as he beheld the slow sine wave of the parade of aquatic life.

It was a rapid rhythm of about eight beats per second, but the movement of the whales was a slow sinuosity—

His mouth actually gaped open.

"And what is this that the whales are saying to us according to you, Dr. Koch?" the interviewer demanded somewhat snidely.

"To tell you the truth," Koch replied in squirming discomfort, "I really have no idea."

But Mario Roca did. He *knew*.

Eight beats per second. Or rather, he knew, without measuring it against a metronome, 8.15.

The whales weren't moving to the rhythm.  
Not 8.15 *beats* a second, 8.15 *Hertz* per second.  
It was a musical note.  
It was a pitch-perfect C.  
Five octaves down from middle C.

Caroline Koch had known of Mario Roca, in fact rather liked his music, but psychically preparing herself to go on after him she hadn't paid much attention to his "Music of Silence" presentation, though she had vaguely heard of it. She was bemused and somewhat flattered when he insisted on buying her a drink after the show.

When she found out why she was poleaxed.

"It's *music*," he told her. "The rhythm of the image oscillations is 8.15 beats per second, which makes no sense if you take it as a bass-line, but 8.15 vibrations per second is a C-note, five octaves down from middle-C."

"Like *The Music of Silence* . . ."

"Exactly. There's something about the key of C that's harmonic to the . . . well, *soul*, if you will. I don't know what, but I know it's true, and so do you, and so does everyone on a deep level, and so, it would seem, do your whales."

"They're not *my* whales, they're the *dolphins'* whales, and it's not *whale* song, it's the *dolphin* version."

It was Mario Roca's turn to give *her* a blank quizzical stare.

"I checked it against the whale song sound-print parameters. Not whale pattern, dolphin pattern. Not whale song, dolphin *art*."

"I don't understand . . ."

"I'm not sure I do. But I think the dolphins are saying something about the whales, and it seems, well, *worshipful*, to a human at least, but of course that's hopelessly anthropomorphic. Or something about the whale . . . soul . . . or how they regard themselves . . . or . . ."

Caroline Koch shrugged her shoulders in frustration.

"So why don't we sing directly to the whales and let them sing their song to us themselves?" said Mario Roca.

Mario Roca considered himself a "serious" musician, but he wouldn't have thrived as such so well for so long without also being a showman; nor was he very shy or self-contemptuous about it, as witness his current and thus far futile talk show campaign to secure financing for a performance of *The Music of Silence*.

And now this woman, and her dolphins and whales, had dropped it into his lap.

"There's some kind of whale migration along the coast of California, isn't there?" he said. "And humans have a thing about whales . . ."

A blank uncomprehending stare.

"There's my audience!" he proclaimed.

"*The gray whales*? You can't get the financing to play *The Music of Silence* to a paying human audience but you expect to get it to play a concert to *whales*?"

"They're *bankable*!" Mario Roca exclaimed.

Caroline Koch gave him a look that would've told anyone that she thought they were crazy.

Like a fox.

"We set up grandstands in good position on the California coast, with conventional stadium speakers and video screens, with your gear to do the receiving, and the necessary underwater speakers to transmit *The Music of Silence* to the whales. The humans hear what I'm playing in middle C and see the whale transmissions through your equipment on the screens, and I play it for the whales five octaves

down. Admission to the live performance at top dollar! Worldwide live broadcast rights! Recording rights! Ring-tones! Depending on what happens, I'll jam beyond the fixed composition with the whales and get enough for DVDs!"

"The cliffs above Malibu would be ideal," Mario Roca told Caroline Koch. "Or San Francisco Bay?"

"You don't get it," she told him.

"Don't get what?"

"The gray whales don't travel in great parades. That's delphine artistic license. They're separated from each other by miles. Whale-watchers consider themselves lucky if they see half a dozen in a day."

Mario Roca gave her a look so unlike any she had ever seen on a human face that she didn't know what to call it—a true magician's divine madness, perhaps, or hubric madness pure and simple.

"Then I'll just have to call them together."

"You expect to . . . to just call the whales to you?"

"Yes I do," said Mario Roca. "*The Music of Silence* will call their spirit from the vasty deep. And yes, they will come when I call."

The temporary seats atop the Malibu cliff were filled, the standing room on the beach was sold out, worldwide television rights were pre-sold, along with the DVD and download rights, and various tie-ins already had the concert maybe \$50 million away from breaking even. The huge underwater speakers were in place, the landside audio system had completed its sound check, the landside video screens were showing the station-break commercials, and Koch's equipment had long since completed its trials. She sat beside him behind it on the pontoon raft offshore, and Mario Roca flexed his fingers over the keyboard of his own rig, ready to begin what would be either the crowning glory of his career or a titanic career-ending financial flop.

All the ducks were lined up, whatever that was supposed to mean, except the whales.

The gray whale migration was well under way out there, and the leviathans had been spotted swimming southward in their usual widely dispersed pattern. Mario Roca had grandly assured Koch and all the investors that they would come when he called with the Shakespearean line, which seemed to have assured everyone but himself.

"Showtime," he muttered to himself, and hit the keys with a mighty deep subsonic C major chord.

While Mario Roca was lining up his lion's share of the financing, Caroline Koch had been doing her bit, securing her modest share with assorted grants from universities and scientific foundations in return for "front row seats," which had turned out to be virtual when Roca refused to let anyone but the two of them out here on the raft, and the right to put their real-time questions to the whales, always assuming that she and Roca would be able to put them.

Assuming that the whales would cooperate, cetacean biologists and people who called themselves "cetacean sociologists" wanted to know how whales could possibly know that the Earth was a sphere. Biophysicists wanted to know why the whales broadcast an 8.15 carrier wave, A.K.A a note precisely five octaves down from middle C. Specialists in cetacean migrations wanted to confirm their theory that it was somehow orienting them, a whale equivalent of a Global Positioning Satellite, active or somehow passive being a shrill bone of contention. Less academically credible pseudo-scientists would also be allowed to put their twenty million cents in if they laid their money down.

And now it was all out of her hands.

It was up to Mario Roca, his music, and the whales.

Mario Roca and Caroline Koch had monitors showing what appeared on the land-side stadium screens behind them and earphones that could be tuned to what the live and television audiences were hearing. Mario Roca was hardly surprised that the audience was not exactly enraptured by an empty ocean and a steady C chord, and could well imagine that demanding rhythmic clapping and foot stomping might be going on way back there over his shoulder.

But there was no point in beginning *The Music of Silence* without the whales.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, a C-note in the same deep subsonic answered back. Mario Roca dropped the C out of his chord. A few moments later, without his touching the keys, it was back.

The as yet unseen whales were filling it in. They were playing in harmony with him! It was beginning to work! And one, and two, and three, and then in dozens, whales were turning shoreward toward him, breaking their millennial migration pattern, as cheers broke out from the audience on the cliffs.

Mario dropped the E from his C major chord. Nothing. The G. Again the whales failed to fill in.

Whales, it seemed, were Johnny One-Notes, and that note was middle C.

They were forming up into a thickening parade past his position now, like an audience filing into a concert hall, which it seemed they were actually becoming, as they stopped and formed up into ranks facing inward in parabolic circles.

Time to give them what they had come to hear. Or at least what he had come to play.

Mario Roca played the opening bar of *The Music of Silence* . . .

Caroline Koch marveled in disbelieving wonder, listening in rapture at the middle-C transposition of what Mario Roca was playing five octaves down to the whales. This she had heard many times before, and while it was pleasant enough to her human ears, it had seemed classically conventional with a few twists, no work of transcendent musical genius. But now, with what seemed like hundreds of gray whales floating motionless in apparently equal or even deeper rapture, it was utter magic even to a scientist who had dedicated her life to the study of the cetaceans, who was surely already up for a Nobel for what she had accomplished.

What she had done joyously paled beside what Mario Roca was achieving now. And indeed a snatch of song from somewhere played back from deep memory said it all for her.

All my life, I have always waited for this moment to arrive.

Mario Roca played *The Music of Silence* through to the end. And waited for the whales to reply. And after a few endless moments of true silence above the sea and below it in all octaves, they did.

A subsonic C far louder than anything the human underwater speakers could produce, a cetacean orchestra and full chorus in parabolic formation forming a far more immense *virtual* speaker and singing that singular inaudible note so powerfully that the surface of the sea between it and the shore rippled with wavelets moving at 8.15 Hertz.

In human musical terms, it was nothing but a single huge note five octaves down from middle C. Transposed upward into human audible range it was only a pleasant enough mantric drone.

But through the machineries of Caroline Koch it was revealed as a kind of carrier wave for the true song of the whales as the whales and dolphins perceived it themselves, and that was epic grandeur.



The waters of an empty sea a few feet down, and then a descent down, down, down, into the deeps, into the abyssal deeps, to the very floor of the ocean pulsing like a human heart.

No, not like the rhythm of a human heart, but the rise and fall of the long sinuous sine wave produced by an Ur-C note uncountable fathoms and five octaves down at the bottom of the sea.

And then there were whales surfing this deep carrier wave in majestic slow motion, gently up and down, the wave made visible only by the movement of the cetacean riders. And then there were impossible shoals and schools of whales in all their tribal diversity—gray whales, right whales, sperm whales, baleins and cachelots—riding the C note wave together, the perspective pulling back, back, back, so that they became tiny figures like blood cells circulating round and about a webwork of veins and arteries. Back, further back still, and the whales themselves dwindled away into invisibility as the webwork of the deep C revealed itself as mapping a slowly rotating globe.

As the sonic circulatory system of the planet itself, as the guide-paths of cetacean migrations, as the ultimate bass line of their songs, not *The Music of Silence* but *The Music of the Sphere*, of Planet Earth itself.

The primal C.

How could the planet itself produce it?

Mario didn't know very much geology, but he knew enough. He knew that the continents and seabeds were solid rock floating on a molten sea, and far beneath that was a globe of iron, and all of it in seething and bubbling motion, grinding, rubbing, clanging and banging against each other at wildly varying beats, producing waves and clashing wave-fronts, sonic, electromagnetic, perhaps even gravitational.

How could this chaos produce a perfect harmonic C?

The scientists would probably argue about it until they were blue in the face, but Mario Roca understood in a flash, for the answer to this ultimate question was the same as the culmination of his ultimate musical vision quest.

It took a musician to understand that the question itself was inside out and upside down.

The true question was not how could such apparent discord produce a perfect harmonic C, and the musical answer was that it *didn't*.

The note that it produced was perceived by humans as the note that most harmonized with their spirit, was the core around which their many musical scales were usually based, was the musical highway of the migrations of the whales and the dolphins of the sea and for all Mario Roca knew of the birds of the air, the vibration that soothed and guided the soul of the biosphere itself, *because it was the song of the planet*.

If there was a biosphere on Mars, it might resonate to E or B flat. Jupiter might be G or F, Venus D sharp, Saturn A.

The whale song stopped. What else, after all, was there to say?

The whales remained silent and motionless waiting for a reply.

What could that possibly be, save *we understand*?

Mario Roca prided himself as a musician on the edge of greatness, and now he had learned something that would have graced his brow with the laurel of a Nobel Prize for Music if such a thing existed, and who knows? It might yet be created to justly honor him.

But there was a limit to his hubris. He knew that he was not capable of improvising a musical reply worthy of this occasion. So he played a piece by a composer whom he could easily enough acknowledge as his master.

And the whales dissolved their unnatural gathering and swam back off to their millennial and primal dance about the planet to Beethoven's *Ode to Joy*.

Transposed to *The Music of the Sphere*, five octaves down in the deep key of C. ○

Josh Roseman (not the trombonist) lives in Georgia (not the country). In addition to *Asimov's*, his fiction has appeared in *Big Pulp* and *Fusion Fragment*, as well as in podcast form on Drabblecast and Dunesteeff. Josh also blogs for *Escape Pod*, and has narrated stories for *StarshipSofa*. To find out what he's doing right now, visit his website, [roseplusman.com](http://roseplusman.com), or find him on Twitter @listener42. The author's first story for us takes a brittle look at the consequences of a very long term draught and what they mean for competing groups of people when the heavens finally . . .

# BRING ON THE RAIN

Josh Roseman

The commodore's cabin is clean, free of the sand that seems to have settled everywhere else. The surfaces are polished, the floor spotless. William guesses the cabin was once a bedroom, but now the only furniture is a huge desk and three chairs, one for the commodore and two for his guests. Bookshelves are built into the walls, crammed with as much literature as the colony has been able to collect in its travels.

And it's been traveling for a long time.

"You're sure, Lieutenant?"

William has long since grown accustomed to the designation. "Yes, Commodore. I'm sure. All my computer models agree."

The commodore steeples his fingers and leans back in his chair, a wooden antique worn smooth with more than a century of use. William stands and waits; his computer models have been continuously refined over the past three decades, and only once in five years has he been wrong. After several seconds of consideration, the commodore nods. "Very well." He writes on his tablet and presses the commit button; William knows that, up on the bridge, the commodore's orders will appear on a repeater screen for the crew to act upon. "You may go, Lieutenant."

"Yes, Commodore." William walks down the narrow corridor to the main cabin, still as well-appointed as it had been when the ship was built in the 1990s. He retrieves his sidearm from the lieutenant who runs the commodore's personal guard, then goes out onto the aft deck. He squints in the bright sunlight—no clouds in the sky to lessen its impact—before covering his eyes with sunglasses.

"Lieutenant," says the Officer of the Deck—a greeting and an acknowledgment of William's greater rank; the OOD wears an ensign's single black bar on his shoulders.

William has never approved of the military fashion in which the commodore runs the colony, and long ago he chose to ride in the middle of the pack, holding his ap-

pointed rank of lieutenant but never actually ordering anyone around. "Can you bring my car in, please?"

"Yes, sir." The ensign blows a four-note melody on his whistle, then shouts to a couple of enlisted men riding on a skid off to port. "Lieutenant Portis, disembarking!"

William watches as the two men work a complicated pulley system; his car, docked at the end of a long, narrow girder, begins moving closer. As he steps up onto the platform, he feels the ship's engines thrumming harder. A moment later, he's hanging on tightly as a loud horn sounds from the bridge deck. That sound is picked up by other ships, echoing outward across the broad, sand-swept plain. Behind William, more than fifty other ships feed power to their engines and, seconds later, the ground below the ship is moving at a much faster clip than the stately twenty-per-hour it was when William had docked his car and come aboard to see the commodore.

Oh well. It's not as if he's never done this before.

William nods to the enlisted men as he reaches the bottom of the port ladder, then takes two quick steps across the skid before climbing onto the car and lowering himself through the opening in the roof. He has to angle his body uncomfortably to drop into the driver's seat. The car is still in neutral, its wheels moving as fast as the ship to which it's docked; William starts the engine and calls the OOD. "I'm ready to go. Thanks for your help."

"Yes, Lieutenant." William sees the ensign's hand come close to the video pickup; the young man works his console and, with a clank and a lurch, the magnetic clamp disengages from the side of the car. William shifts into gear and steps down on the accelerator; the engine catches and he turns the wheel left, veering away from the commodore's ship. It's the only one, he notices, that still has a gleaming-white hull; the rest of the ships in the Demetrius Colony are rusted or discolored or battle-scarred, but somehow the *Royal Admiral* has stayed as clean on the outside as the inside.

William drives past the colony before reversing course; it's easier to dock at his home ship if he's coming up from behind. The rear-guard gunners salute as they see his dusty beige car pass, but he doesn't acknowledge them. He's busy navigating the small sea of colony ships, which have accelerated to 110-per-hour, keeping one eye on what's in front of him and the other on the position display—wouldn't do to get in the way of another vehicle, but this time there's no one else out except for him and a couple of patrols, picked out in pale yellow on his screen.

Up ahead, he sees the broad stern of the *Mighty Mississippi*, its huge turbines mounted to long-disused fiberglass paddle-wheels. He calls the supercargo, whose features fills his display. "Ready to board," he says.

The supercargo's dirty face is streaked with sweat. "You're cleared for Slot 12. Opening main door."

"Got it." William shuts off the screen. In front of him, the huge panel at the aft of the *Mighty Mississippi* eases downward, clanging as it hits the dry, cracked ground. William lines up his car, then presses hard on the accelerator; the little vehicle zips up the ramp and into the hold. Through his open roof he hears the heavy *ka-chunka-chunka* of gears pulling the door closed behind him, but he's already hitting the brakes hard, seatbelt locking, preventing inertia from throwing him through the windshield. Once he's down to ten-per-hour, he flicks on his lights and drives to Slot 12; as soon as he's in, the slot lowers itself thirty centimeters, effectively locking the car in place. He engages the emergency brake anyway, then shuts down the engine and steps out.

"Any problems?" asks the supercargo.

"None."

"What about the commodore? I heard the horns, but . . ."

William gives the man a nod. "We're going," he says.

The supercargo's face brightens as he smiles. "Finally! You know my youngest has never actually seen a true storm?"

"Now he will." William knows the supercargo has three sons. He knows everyone on the *Mighty Mississippi*; he's been living here for the past fifteen years. "I'm heading upstairs. Say hi to Dinah and the boys, will you?"

"Sure thing."

William claps the supercargo on the shoulder, then heads for the door. Couldn't hurt to check his models one last time.

William wakes in the middle of the night, jolted out of a dream by the sound of horns. This time, it's not the deep horns that warn of a course change; this time, it's the staccato bursts that signal an attack.

"How did they find us?" Andie asks as she climbs out of bed. "The scouts said we were clear for fifty kilometers!"

"I have no idea," William says. He watches Andie pull off her nightgown and struggle into her uniform. Objectively, Andie's prettier than his wife was, though Rina's still his first love. He doesn't think Rina would mind, though, that he's sleeping with the first officer of the *Mighty Mississippi*.

Andie adjusts her jacket, then pulls her gray-streaked brown hair back into a tail. "Are you up?"

He's awake, but he knows what she means. "No. Not until next week."

"Then get to a saferoom and stay there," she orders. "I don't want anything to happen to you."

"Why, Andie," he says, sitting up in bed and grinning, "I didn't know you cared."

She gives him a frustrated look. "Don't be an ass. Of course I care." The look turns wry. "Who'll find us water if you get killed?" She blows him a kiss, then leaves the cabin, boots loud on the old wooden floors.

He shakes his head, then gets up and gets dressed. Under his feet, the deck shudders as the *Mighty Mississippi* increases speed; the turbine engines are at full bore now. It sounds like they're pushing the ship at the colony's maximum speed of 150; the *Mighty Mississippi* can reach 175 with a good tailwind, but 150 is still more than the engineers will like.

Dressed, William locks his cabin—not that anyone would steal from him, but it's an old habit—and makes his way to Deck Four.

The all-clear message arrives four hours later, and William sees the sun coming over the horizon as he and the hundreds in the saferoom rush out to see what's happened while they were locked away. William stands at the railing, next to one of his neighbors, looking out at the ships nearest to them. "Not too bad," the man says. "We're still moving, anyway."

William nods. He and Don are next to the casing that holds the port-side paddle-wheel. There's smoke coming from a large yacht thirty meters distant, but nothing else looks out of place. He goes back into the ship, to the ladder that goes between the decks.

Up on Deck One, William finds Andie on the open platform aft of the bridge. Though he's not fond of being a lieutenant, having rank allows him to be present. He brushes her hand and she flashes him a quick smile. "Did we lose anyone?" he asks quietly.

"One of the gunships was bombed," she says. "The *Brasilia*. Sixteen dead, and we had to scuttle the ship. Two more died when their trucks were rammed. Don't know how many injured, but *Royal Admiral* estimates fewer than one hundred overall."

William wants to touch Andie, to reassure her—and himself—but the set of her

shoulders and the lines around her mouth tell him not to. "How about our ship? Anything I can do?"

"No." Her comm chimes, and she reads something off the small screen, then presses a couple of buttons and clips it back onto her belt. "We took a couple of shells, but they missed the engines and the paddlewheels. She's a tough old bitch."

He smiles. Andie loves the *Mighty Mississippi*; she's passed up several chances to command newer or faster or stronger ships. He knows the commodore wants her on the Council, but only ship's captains can serve. It doesn't matter to either of them, though; they're together on the *Mighty Mississippi*, happy most of the time, and—unlike the smaller colonies they've absorbed or the bigger ones that have trouble keeping their citizens happy—they have William and his computer models to help them find water.

"I'm going down below," William says after a long moment. "The repair crews are going to need coffee."

Andie nods, but doesn't look at William. He goes down to the cargo bay, where the crews for this quadrant of the colony will come together and receive their assignments. William hears the supercargo complaining about the damage the main door will suffer from all the cars and trucks driving over it, but everyone—including the supercargo—knows that being attacked is a part of life, especially if they're searching for water. After all, William's not the only meteorologist on the continent, and if he can find a storm, so can others.

The colony fights off a band of raiders in small, fast boats—and destroys half of them—but isn't bothered for the rest of the week. At night they go faster, but every other day the ships slow down, the solar collectors they plundered from a city in what used to be Arizona recharging as many batteries as possible. William still remembers when the colony laid siege to the city, forcing them to give up the collectors and threatening the families of the engineers: come with us and make the collectors work on our ships, or we'll kill the people you love.

It hadn't been the colony's finest day, but even William had realized the necessity of alternate forms of fuel. Nomadic colonies were more likely to survive because they could go and find the resources they needed, but the unfortunate tradeoff was that they needed resources to be nomadic. The solar collectors solved many of their problems. Plus, William knows, with water as precious as it is now, being able to find it and get to it is safer for everyone; bringing the colony to the water means no one gets ambushed bringing it back.

In thirty years with the colony, William has been part of more than one ambush party, stealing water to survive. He much prefers using his computer models to find water and bring the colony to it.

"We'll be there in a couple of hours," he tells Rina. She hasn't responded in seven years. "This will be a big one, the biggest since . . . well, probably since I lost you." A photograph of her smiling face looks up at him from the desk in his cabin. "You'd have loved it, Rina. Lightning, torrential downpours, the works. Nothing's actually pointing in this direction—the apprentices all say it'll be near Lake Michigan." Or what's left of it, he amends mentally; there hasn't been more than sludge and debris there since the Event, since the planet was blasted for two days by radiation and heat from a solar storm no scientist predicted. It had killed almost three-quarters of the population and left most surface water undrinkable. Climate change had done the rest.

"The hydrology crews have the collectors ready to deploy, and the container ships have been scrubbed. Finally we'll have water that doesn't taste like metal. And we'll all get to bathe."

Rina's smiling face doesn't change, even when William strokes the surface of the photograph. He remembers the rain that came in their first year together, right after they were married; they'd joined hundreds of others, stripping off their clothes and exulting in the cool water misting down from the sky. He's found the colony bigger storms since, but that type of rain—there are maybe four storms like it each year, and William usually gets them in range of one, sometimes two—makes his heart grow warm.

William is an expert at finding rain, but Rina had been something special; when Rina found a storm, it was always a monster, washing away months—sometimes years—of accumulated dust and sand and dirt, filling the container ships almost to capacity, and giving everyone hope that maybe this time things would be different, that maybe this time the weather had finally changed for the better.

It never does. It never will. William knows that, and, deep down, so does everyone else.

William's comm rings. He touches the photo again, puts it back in the little box in his top drawer before answering.

"Come up to the bridge." It's Andie. "The commodore needs to speak to you."

Andie uses her influence to be assigned to the contact team; she's driving the white van, William seated beside her. Two security guards are in the back row of seats, and in the middle, controlling the main gun, is a wiry young man, probably on his first mission.

In the side-view mirror, William sees the ships of the colony grow smaller. Repeater screens show the approximate location of the other colony and, up ahead, the single vehicle the commodore negotiated for them to meet. It's a dirty red truck, bigger than their van but less aerodynamic; William's seen a few like it in Demetrius, mostly used for transporting groups or medium-sized cargo. It could probably hold a dozen soldiers, though the scanner reads only five heat signatures. "Looks like they're holding to the agreement," he tells Andie. Then, to the gunner, "What do you see, Paolo?"

"One cannon," he says, his voice through the door-mounted speakers a little quavery—definitely his first mission. "And, I think, two submachine guns as well."

"Stay locked onto their gunner, Mr. Ruiz. If this turns bad, I don't want them shooting up our asses."

"Yes, Commander."

William hears the gears of the gun moving as Paolo takes aim. "I think they just want to talk, Andie," he says. He wants to reach for her hand, resting on the shifter, so invitingly close, but the two guards don't need to know they're more than shipmates, more than colleagues.

She makes a derisive noise. "You're our best meteorologist. You found a storm that's not supposed to be here, that there aren't any signs of. But the Jairasu are here anyway."

The implications of that name are heavy in the air, especially for William. "I never told the commodore—or anyone else—that I was the only one who could find the storm," he says. "And anyone who can program a computer can, with enough time, learn to read the data like I do."

"We need this storm, Lieutenant," Andie snaps. There's nothing in her voice to indicate that she was ever more than his commanding officer. That hurts, but he has to let it go. She's in command mode now.

The van coasts to a stop; Andie leaves the engine running. The guards open the side doors and jump out, weapons pointed at the ground. Two soldiers—one with a shotgun, the other holding two pistols—step out of the red truck. Andie nods to William and touches his shoulder; he turns to her and sees the worry in her face and



he wants to hold her, to tell her it'll be all right. Instead he follows her lead, disem-barking from the van. It's been a long time since he's stood on ground that isn't moving; he forces himself not to sway, not to show weakness.

The front doors of the truck swing open and two more people step out. The passenger has two pistols in his belt, grips forward for a cross-draw, but it's the driver who grabs William's attention.

"Rina?"

Rina's blue eyes are chips of stone in her dark face. Her hair is cut close to her head, bare arms more muscular, body leaner than before.

William, for his part, can barely move. He's staring at Rina's smile, at bright-white teeth bared in an expression not even close to friendly. She takes in the rank stripes on his shoulders. "Still a lieutenant?" Her words lilt, voice musical. "And who is this?"

"Commander Andie Shepherd," she says. "You called this meeting. Why?"

When Rina looks to Andie, William finds himself able to breathe again. He tries not to gasp in the dry, dirty air. She's not supposed to be here. She's not supposed to be *alive*: seven years ago, Rina was on patrol duty when the colony was attacked by the *Jairasu*, a converted luxury liner with eight overweaponed gunships zipping around it in formation. Demetrius turned and ran, pursued by three *Jairasu* ships; one of the colony's gunships was obliterated before they made their escape. No colony William knows of, including his own, has ever been strong enough to take on the *Jairasu*.

But it still doesn't explain how Rina survived. Three days after the battle, William joined a convoy to go back and search for survivors. No bodies were found—just scorch marks, dried blood, and the occasional scrap of clothing or desiccated flesh— but given the size of the explosion, they hadn't expected more.

And William certainly hadn't expected to see her alive again, working for the most-feared colony in all of North America.

"Lieutenant!"

Andie's command voice brings him back. "Y . . ." He swallows, wishing he had some water; it's back in the van, for all the good that'll do. "Yes, Commander?"

"Miss Meredyth has some data for you." Andie hands him a tablet; he shades the screen with his hand, skims the information there. "Do you agree?"

William reads the tablet again, then offers it to Rina. "I'm sorry, Commander, but I don't."

Rina folds her arms. Behind her, the soldier with the shotgun takes aim at the van. The man standing at Rina's side draws his pistols. "Take another look," Rina says.

He shakes his head. "I don't know what you want, Rina."

A gunshot echoes across the heat-blasted ground; the bullet buries itself into the cracked pavement at William's feet. "You will be respectful!" the soldier snaps.

William hands the tablet to Andie, then puts his hands behind his back. He carries his pistol there only because it has to be somewhere. He hopes Rina doesn't remember that. "Fine," he says. "Miss Meredyth, please tell me what you want me to say."

Her smile grows nastier, if that's possible. "You want to say that my data are right. You want to say that the Demetrius Colony is going to divert course one hundred kilometers to the east."

He catches Andie out of the corner of his eye. She gives the minutest possible nod. "All right," William says. "I'll recommend we move."

"A wise decision." Rina's soldiers point their weapons back at the ground and William's party backs up, climbing into the van. Andie moves the shifter and they back away; she waits for more than 200 meters to pass before she turns the wheel and points them toward the colony.

Not a word is said by anyone.



The commodore refuses to bend—"We won't let them chase us off again," he says over the colony's radio network; "we won't let them steal our water!" William hates himself for his own pragmatism: he knows the decision is correct; he knows the Demetrius Colony needs water; he knows it would be a colossal mistake to pass up a storm like this, one that could quench their thirst—and their children's thirst—for months.

Despite the twisting fear in his stomach, six hours after the meeting with the Jairasu—with Rina—William is piloting a small, fast car with a trio of submachine guns mounted to the rear. In the passenger seat is another young gunner, a girl named Shanna with skin even darker than Rina's, her hair intricately braided, blood-red beads woven into the rows. Her hands are steady on the gunnery controls.

William's car is one of dozens, a phalanx of small vehicles, gunships, and even two cruisers bearing heavy artillery, powerful enough to seriously inconvenience even large ships. It's the biggest show of force William's ever seen, by the Demetrius Colony or any other.

The gunner offers William a dense, wood-colored bar. "Thanks," he says. It tastes like it looks, but it'll keep his energy up. He follows it with a swallow from his canteen, a tall metal bottle with a liter of water inside. "Not your first time out?"

She shakes her head. "I'm part of the gunnery maintenance crew on the *Jekyll*," she says. "Never been in one of these little cars, but I know plenty about guns."

"Good. I really don't want to get killed out here."

Shanna's teeth aren't as bright as Rina's, but her dark eyes shine in the light of the setting sun. "Keep us out of the way of the other guys," she tells him, "and I'll do the rest."

William's car is on the fringes of the phalanx. He knows Andie is on the bridge of the *Mighty Mississippi*; as one of the biggest ships in the colony, it serves as one of several communication hubs. She'll be safer there anyway. As safe as anywhere, he amends mentally; the commodore refused to move the colony, despite the Jairasu threat—Rina's threat—and the storm will come soon. Already huge puffy clouds have moved in, and William's models predict that the first of the rains will start soon.

"It's a damn waste," he says softly, gripping the wheel.

"The water?"

"Yes."

Shanna nods. "Maybe that's their plan."

"What do you mean?"

"The Jairasu are pretty much one huge ship, right?"

"Pretty much."

"So they'll probably just send in their gunships and protect the main vessel. All we have to do is hold them off until the storm ends."

William gives her a tiny, tight smile. "That doesn't make me feel any better."

"Sorry, sir."

"Don't call me 'sir.'"

"You're the boss."

The Jairasu gunships are big and fast, and, to make matters worse, they're maneuverable, too. "It's not fair," William grumbles as he joins formation with six other cars. He feels the wheels skid on the mist-slicked ground as the cars strafe past *Mars*—the Jairasu gunships are all named for planets. So far, *Neptune* has been destroyed, a smoldering hulk taken out by the grenade-equipped vans in the Fourth Group. William's car is part of the Sixth Group; one of their number is already gone,

a brief bloom of flame and then nothing but twisted metal and corpses. Overall the Jairasu are winning: the comm chatter coming through the door speakers confirms that. Six more cars and two gunships are gone forever from the Demetrius Colony, and one of the water carriers, the *Farmer's Dell*, was hulled early on and is probably still spilling the precious liquid.

The guns behind William chatter—Shanna twisting her controls and raking *Mars*. The Jairasu ship's huge gun barks once and an explosion forces the Sixth Group to scatter. Vehicles zip and twist around each other, trying to stay in formation, to concentrate their fire, but there's just too much coming from the remaining five Jairasu ships.

"What's that?"

"What's what?" William yanks the wheel hard to the left; the tires squeal, trying to get traction. He pumps the brake, which helps a little.

"Bearing 245 relative," Shanna says. She adjusts her guns so she can look through the digitally augmented sight. "That's not good."

William spares a glance at the repeater; Shanna's thrown her gunsight feed up onto it. "No," William agrees, "that's not good."

Orders are coming up on the repeater now: Fourth through Eighth Groups, intercept small craft. William checks his bearing, then presses hard on the accelerator. The engine whines; the speed display ticks upward as they get closer.

The approaching vehicles aren't cars; they're much smaller. Motorcycles, armed with what look like grenade launchers. The drivers are exposed, protected only by windscreens and helmets.

"Sixth Group!" It's the voice of Lieutenant Tenay, who's in command. "Pick your targets! Fire at will!"

William aims at a cluster of three motorcycles; Shanna presses her triggers and bullets spatter outward. Two of the bikes lose control—one of the drivers is flung into the path of a Sixth Group truck, cracking its windscreen as he bounces off—but the third manages to fire his own weapon. William decelerates, twisting the wheel, then drops into reverse gear and guns the engine.

The grenade explodes close enough that the heat washes over them. By the light of the blast, Shanna blows the motorcycle to bits.

All around them, the Demetrius groups have the Jairasu well overmatched—the bikes are fragile, and not well-balanced for fighting on wet ground—and, after Shanna dispatches two more, William takes a moment to check the tactical display.

"It's a trick!" He reorients their course and leaves the group behind. "Look!"

"But why send out vehicles that are so easy to kill?"

"Suicide fighters." William swerves around a destroyed car. "Couple of hundred years ago, used when battles were fought in the air. Then, sixty years later, people strapped bombs to their bodies. Same principle."

"But . . . who would sign up for that?"

"They probably didn't know." William pushes the accelerator as hard as he can. His repeater shows new orders: abandon the bikes, lay down covering fire, return to Point Nine—the original staging line. "Looks like someone up there figured things out."

Shanna's gun chatters; two lights on the tactical display blink out. But up ahead are *Mars* and *Saturn*; they're shelling the *Hamilton*, the remaining cruiser in the battle group, but at least the *Hamilton* is still firing back.

The Sixth Group forms up. Shanna drops her seat flat so she can change out her ammunition, going from standard rounds to acid slugs. She sits up straight again, teeth bared. "Teach those bastards to destroy my friends," she growls.

William isn't so sanguine about taking life. He knows he has to; he knows that,

without the storm—which is going to flood this area in little more than ninety minutes—the colony might not last much longer. It doesn't make him any happier.

The gun stutters, the noise deeper; the slugs tear into the aft section of the *Mars*. As William shoots the car past it, he sees Shanna firing into its engine, her aim perfect. When the gun goes quiet and his ears readjust, he hears the difference in the sound of the Jairasu ship. "All vehicles, concentrate fire on *Mars*!" Tenay orders.

A minute later, the gunship is destroyed.

Only *Jupiter* and *Pluto* manage to escape the Demetrius battle groups, though as it departs, *Pluto* is struck by a huge bomb, fired from the remains of the *Hamilton*, and it goes up in a reddish-orange gout of flame. No one cheers; the losses to the colony are too great for that.

William and Shanna read the screen as they form up: two cruisers, a water-carrier, five gunships, twenty-three smaller vehicles, more than six hundred people. William feels sick; Shanna seems subdued, playing with one of her braids. "We won, though. We'll get the water."

"I don't know if I'd call it a win," William says. He checks his heads-up display: they have enough fuel to continue patrolling for another two hours. "How's your supply?"

"We're good," she says. "Plenty of ammo."

"That's reassuring," William doesn't feel reassured, though.

Rain patters gently on the now-closed roof of the car. Shanna opens her window and cups her hand, then brings the water to her mouth. "Amazing," she says. "Absolutely amazing."

William doesn't say anything, just drinks a little from his canteen. Something's not right: everything he's heard about the Jairasu makes him doubt that the battle's truly over. The last colony to stand and fight against them is now a graveyard of dead ships along what used to be the banks of the Hudson River. That colony wasn't as big as Demetrius, but they weren't pushovers, either. And still the Jairasu made short work of them.

Still, without more than a vague feeling, William can't do anything but follow his patrol route and wait for the storm.

Which, at least, comes right on schedule. The wind picks up somewhat, and just after that, the pattering on the roof and windscreen becomes a downpour. William activates the wipers, but they don't help much; between the darkness and the rain, he finds himself navigating by the tactical display.

"I hope the container ships are getting this," Shanna says. "It's unbelievable."

William nods. "I'm sure they're doing what they're supposed to." His eyes are still on the tactical display. "That's odd."

"What?"

"Look." He points to something on the edge of the infrared sensor's range. "What do you think that is?"

Shanna shrugs. "Probably the part of the ground that's not getting rained on."

"I don't think so. The storm is small, but not that small." He keys in to Lieutenant Tenay's frequency. "Sir," he says, ignoring his dislike of protocol, "take a look at bearing 258 relative; can you request they boost the scanner?"

"In this mess? Portis, you must be nuts; nothing works when there's this much interference."

"There's something out there," William says. "I'm sure of it."

He can picture the lieutenant shaking his head. "All our firepower is deployed along that side anyway. If something's coming, we'll catch it."

William closes the channel. "Do you still have the acid slugs loaded?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"We're going to figure out what that thing is."

"Lieu—" She pauses when she sees his expression. "Look, it's not our job, and if we break formation for no reason—"

"Then get out," he tells her. His hand goes to the shifter. "Say the word and I'll let you off. No questions. I'll take the blame if there's any to be had."

Shanna makes an amused sound deep in her throat. "Who's going to protect your ass if I jump ship?" She smiles. "Let's go."

William checks the tactical display, and when there's an opening, he pulls the car out of formation and aims for 258 relative. The lieutenant's voice starts calling for him over the speakers, first as if there might be something wrong, but then more angrily.

Shanna turns the comm down to a low murmur, almost lost among the sounds of the storm. The lightning has started, occasional flashes punctuated by booms of thunder. The first one makes Shanna jump in her seat, but she recovers. "That never gets old."

William spares her a small grin, but that's all he can offer. He switches from tactical to infrared sensors, watching for the surviving gunship.

It's not there. Nothing's there but a huge heat blob that worries him more with every passing second.

"We didn't drive them off," William says. "I know that much. No one drives off the Jairasu." He focuses the infrared scanner: plenty of heat, and the telltale purple areas that indicate engine compartments. "They're out there," he says. "And they're moving."

"Then why are we still here? Call the lieutenant!"

William shakes his head. "We can't. Look." He clicks the tuning knob on the comm unit: static on all the channels. "It's a white-noise field. We have them too, but if we use them, we can't communicate either." He flips to a lower-frequency band; the carrier signal is mercifully clear. He presses the transmit button, then repeats the same three-letter combination over and over.

"Will we get a reply?"

"No. This band is transmit-only from here. But hopefully they'll get the message."

Shanna puts her sights on. "Move us closer. I'll try to slow them down."

"With that gun? Really?"

She nods. "Just do it. We're out here; we have to do something!"

William swings the car out wide and comes around behind the flagship. As he gets closer, he realizes just how enormous it is, and how fast it's going. Somehow the monstrosity is moving at a steady 130-an-hour, and in this weather, the smaller wheels of the car have a difficult time keeping up. But he manages to come alongside one of the gigantic tires, pushing the engine as hard as he can. Several displays are red-lined by the time he gets close enough to one of the hundreds of wheels keeping the Jairasu flagship moving.

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Shanna takes aim. Fires.

Fires again.

And again.

William has to back off the accelerator before the engine overheats. The car starts falling back. Its lights hit the wheel that Shanna shot: it's pitted where the chemical has eaten into it, but the ship itself hasn't slowed down at all.

Shanna tosses her sights on the dashboard in front of her. He can see tears in her eyes. "They're going to kill everyone," she says. "They're going to destroy our ships and no one will be able to do anything."

"They're heading straight into the colony's teeth. They'll at least be able to slow them down, or get out of the way—"

"You don't really believe that, do you?"

William doesn't. The very thought of the biggest, most powerful ship known to be roaming the western hemisphere, moving at this speed? They'll never see it coming.

William manages to coax enough out of the engine to almost catch back up to the *Jairasu* before the massive liner slams into the heart of the Demetrius Colony. The smaller ships are maneuverable enough to get out of the way, but the tactical display shows that the core vessels have no chance.

Shanna and William watch as the lights blink out from the display. *Supreme Illusion* falls first. Then *Strongman Jack* and *Coburn*. Two of the water-carriers are next, and then William's heart stops.

The *Mighty Mississippi* is gone.

The *Jairasu* leave long before the storm ends. By morning it's rained itself out and William and Shanna, who abandoned their car to join the rescue effort, are able to see the destruction.

"My God," she whispers, clutching William's hand. "My God, look at it!"

He can barely stand to. The water glistening on every broken surface will be evaporated away soon. His brain fills in the broad swath of missing ships: at least twenty are lost, probably destroyed, and there must be thousands dead.

Last night, the two of them tried to find the *Mighty Mississippi*, but the big ship has disappeared. As the sun starts to rise, he sees marks on the ground heading eastward: something huge was pulled against its will.

William practically drags Shanna to an abandoned car and slams it into gear, following the direction of the scorch marks. Four kilometers away, he finds the forward half of the *Mighty Mississippi*, her turbines sheared away. There's ruins a few hundred meters back, probably where the engine compartment blew up. William slams on the brakes, the car screeching to a halt, and jumps out. He and Shanna sprint across the already-steaming ground to the broadsided, broken ship.

"Andie!" he shouts. "Andie!"

He sees the bridge, its canopy peeling away from the upper deck. "Andie!"

"Who's there?" It's a male voice. "William, is that you?"

It's Captain Marshall. "Where's Andie?"

A long pause. "She's trapped," the captain yells down. "Call for help! Quickly, before—"

Metal shrieks. The entire bridge pulls away from the ship and crashes to the ground. An instant later, a small explosion blows a wave of heat in William's direction.

Shanna grabs him before he can run into the burning wreckage. "They're dead," she says, her grip vise-tight as he tries to pull away. "Damn it, William, she's dead!"

Though he fights Shanna as she pulls him back to the car, he knows he'll never see Andie again.

\* \* \*

It takes a month for the Demetrius Colony to recover. The commodore still leads, and there are still twenty-two viable ships. The smaller vehicles have nowhere to dock anymore, but some of the hulks are cannibalized into rolling platforms, and that helps. Five water-carriers are still intact, though there's little protection for them now that there's only one remaining gunship.

"Find us water," the commodore orders William, who again stands in the book-lined cabin—which has taken surprisingly little damage. Either that, or he told them to clean it up at the expense of others. "Find us another storm, Lieutenant."

"Why? So the Jairasu can just take it away again?"

"What would you have us do? Go after them?"

William tosses a tablet on the commodore's desk. "They warned us! Damn you, they told us exactly what they were doing! And you ignored it!"

"We needed that water," the commodore says, his voice quiet and deadly. "And you're out of order."

"I'm out of order, am I?" William grabs the desk and shoves it; the commodore is knocked onto his back, stuck in his chair. William comes around and kneels beside him. "How does it feel?"

"Let me up!"

"No. Not until you learn how it felt for the people who died because you couldn't heed a warning." He feels his throat go tight. "It was like this for Andie, you know. Trapped on the bridge of the *Mighty Mississippi*, knowing she was about to die a horrible death." He rips the rank from the commodore's shoulders. "I'm taking a cruiser and as many others as want to follow, and we're going after the Jairasu."

"That's suicide!"

"Maybe." William gets to his feet. "But they aren't invincible. We destroyed some of their ships, and now I'm going to wipe them off the face of the planet." He permits himself a small smile. "And Andie deserves better. Her, and all the others you allowed to die."

The commodore calls William's name, but he doesn't turn; he leaves the cabin, leaves the ship, and walks to the *Shepherd*—formerly the *San Diego*. Sixteen of the fastest, best-armed cars and trucks are parked near the sleek, powerful vessel. There's also a converted yacht filled with water, courtesy of some of Shanna's connections.

On the *Shepherd's* bridge, William takes a moment to check his comm. He already knows what's in there: Rina's message, sent in the middle of the storm—he hasn't changed his comm frequency, so it's not surprising that she was able to get him. "You never came after me," Rina says, smiling sadly into the video pickup. He's listened to the message more than a dozen times. "I survived, I made myself useful, I worked my way up. I fought to give Demetrius a warning, but you didn't listen. My people had no choice."

The first time, William had flung the comm across the parched ground, but Rina's voice had continued speaking.

"I'm not sorry. We did what we had to do to survive. Just like you." She pauses. "Don't cross our path again." It looks for a moment like she's going to say something else, but the message ends there.

William puts the comm away. Shanna and three young men step onto the bridge a couple of minutes later; the men take stations, and Shanna stands beside William, looking out at the Demetrius Colony. "We're ready," she tells him. He nods, and she orders the Shepherd Colony to get underway.

William is pretty sure Andie wouldn't be happy that he's on a mission to avenge her death, but he doesn't care. The Jairasu are going to pay for this.

Rina's going to pay for this. ○



# TWELVERS

Leah Cypess

**Leah Cypess used to be a practicing attorney in New York and is now a full-time writer in Boston. She tells us that she much prefers her current situation. Leah's two young adult fantasy novels, *Mistwood* and *Nightspell*, were both published by HarperCollins/Greenwillow. Her ability to inhabit the mind of a young person is sharply on display in her first tale for *Asimov's*. You can learn more about the author's work at [www.leahcypess.com](http://www.leahcypess.com).**

**D**arla Tappin stood in front of her bedroom mirror and practiced losing her temper. She had spent the past five lunch periods paying attention to how the other kids did it: the gradual build-up of irritation, the sullen silence, the sudden explosion. She had all the mechanics down, but still sensed there was something unconvincing about her performance. And it had to be perfect, or the whispers would turn into shouts, and shoves, and eventually frosty silence.

She had heard the first whisper just a week ago, minutes after Ms. Hastim announced her latest pop quiz. It had come from behind, a barbed hiss: *Twelver*. She had not turned to see who'd said it, not shown any reaction at all, thinking that would make her seem less guilty. Mistake. Anyone normal would have been furious.

And then yesterday, Leora had cut in front of her on the lunch line, jabbering with one of her new friends. Darla had remained still, bound by the ridiculous hope that Leora would turn and include her in the conversation; and while she stood there, the other girl looked straight at her and mouthed it: *Twelver*.

She had to do something. She faced the mirror, clenched her fists—then loosened them, because it hurt her fingers—and imagined Leora stepping right in front of her, as if Darla didn't exist. The memory made her sad and bewildered, but not angry. She drew in her breath and spat out, "You think you're better than everyone else, but you're just a short ugly loser!"

Unfortunately, at that moment her mother pushed open the bedroom door.

Half an hour later, Darla was on the living room couch being subjected to a long, carefully-planned lecture: Darla wasn't ugly, she wasn't a loser, there was nothing wrong with being short, and why would she think she was better than everyone else? Darla didn't bother explaining that she hadn't been yelling at *herself* in the mirror; her mother was a psychiatrist and would never believe her. Besides, explaining what she had really been doing wouldn't make her mother feel much better. Explaining things to Darla's parents very rarely made them feel better, though sometimes Darla felt compelled to try anyhow.

"I don't think I'm better than everyone else," she said about halfway through Speech #4, in one of those fruitless attempts. "I think I'm worse."

"Darla!" her mother wailed.



Darla's father gestured at the voice-transmitter at her mother's throat. "You should turn that off," he said. "We don't want the baby exposed to any negativity."

Her mother nodded, flicked the switch, and gave Darla a reproachful look.

Darla didn't get that—if the point of the voice-transmitter was to simulate the in-utero experience, shouldn't the transmitter be left on all the time? Back when women had carried their fetuses around inside them, the babies must have heard everything. But she knew better than to bring up her brother, gestating in an artificial womb in New Jersey. Nothing was more guaranteed to lead to the topic of why her brother was only going to be gestated for nine months, instead of twelve like her. And no topic was more guaranteed to lead to another round of speeches about how there was nothing wrong with her.

Only this time, they would be speeches her parents didn't believe any more than she did.

It started again in Ms. Hastim's biology class. Darla was taking notes on the reproductive cycle, and trying to avoid staring at Ms. Hastim's protruding abdomen, when something sharp jabbed into the small of her back.

She yelped. Everyone turned to stare at her, and Ms. Hastim—who was always short-tempered these days—snapped, "Something you want to share with the class, Darla?"

"No," Darla said. "Sorry."

Ms. Hastim glared at her and waddled over to the blackboard. As soon as the teacher turned her back, the jab came again; but this time Darla was prepared for it. She slid her hand behind her back, grabbed the pencil, and pulled.

Carl Green pulled back. The pencil broke. This time it was Carl who made the sound; and, after being subjected to a nasty look by Ms. Hastim, he hissed at Darla, "Twelver."

Darla didn't turn around to look at him, but she couldn't help glancing at Leora, who was watching with what might be sympathy. Of course, since Carl was Leora's ex-boyfriend, the sympathy probably had less to do with Darla and more to do with who her tormentor was.

"Don't be pathetic, ice-bucket," Carl whispered. "Stick to your own social level."

Darla quickly refocused on the front of the classroom, just in time to meet another of Ms. Hastim's weary, irritated looks.

She had been giving those looks a lot lately—which was, Darla thought, Ms. Hastim's own fault. It would have been difficult enough to maintain discipline while teaching the reproductive system to a classroom of seventh graders. Ms. Hastim had put herself in an impossible situation by doing it while pregnant. Not pregnant like Darla's mother and most other women were pregnant, but pregnant the old-fashioned way, with the baby right there inside her body.

"What really freaks me out," Leora had whispered to Darla, on one of those days when she was deigning to be nice to her, "is that when they do it naturally, the baby could come out *at any time*. What if it just popped out in the middle of class?"

That thought didn't make it any easier to concentrate, even after Darla had looked it up and realized it wouldn't happen like that. The way it *would* happen was disturbing enough.

Carl spent the next ten minutes jabbing Darla's back with his pencil and hissing unoriginal insults. Darla had no reason to think he would get bored with that occupation before class was over. She sighed and did her best to ignore it, sinking instead into a daydream that involved her doing something so incredible that Leora would beg to be her friend again. . . .

"Twelver," Ms. Hastim said.

Darla jerked to attention, suddenly wide awake. Around her, her classmates were snickering and exchanging snide looks; apparently, the lesson had become interesting

some time ago, while she had been too wrapped in her sad little daydream to notice.

"Twelvers," Ms. Hastim went on, "are the perfect examples of the unintended consequences when scientists think they can do better than nature."

"Yeah," Carl muttered behind Darla, "obviously *you* think so."

He said it dangerously loudly, and half the class snickered, but Ms. Hastim either ignored him or didn't hear him. She waddled to the z-board and pulled up a chart showing how many women in the United States gestated their children in artificial wombs.

Darla sank lower into her chair, trying to hope that this wouldn't be bad. Ms. Hastim was a member of the Hystera Sisterhood—obviously—and she made no attempt to hide her opinions. It seemed entirely possible that she would spend the entire lesson going on about how natural and beautiful it was to grow another body inside your own. Maybe they wouldn't get back to Twelvers until the next class. Maybe Darla could pretend to be sick and skip school tomorrow.

"It has long been suspected," Ms. Hastim lectured, jabbing at the chart in a way that reminded Darla of Carl (who was still occasionally poking her), "that the human gestation period is too short, limited by the need to get over-large heads through the narrow female pelvis. When artificial wombs were 'perfected'—her tone placed sarcastic quote marks around the word—"the companies sold it as a unique opportunity to correct this problem. Those women who could afford it jumped at the opportunity to have the first three months of their babies' lives—the so called 'fourth trimester' with its frequent feedings, colic, and fussiness—take place in utero."

Those women, her tone implied, were clearly unnatural creatures who probably didn't deserve to have children in the first place. Darla risked a quick glance around the classroom. Leora was looking at her again, but Darla couldn't read the expression on Leora's perfectly made-up face. She probably should have summoned up an expression of her own—rolled her eyes, maybe—but by the time she thought of it, Leora was facing forward again, her hand raised stiffly in the air.

Ms. Hastim paused. "Yes?"

"I really don't think," Leora said primly, "that you should be saying negative things about Twelvers in the classroom."

The room was suddenly completely silent, as if a blanket of stillness had been dropped over it. Carl even stopped in mid-jab, the point of his pencil pressing into Darla's back. Darla didn't reach around to grab it. She was, like everyone else, staring at Ms. Hastim.

Whose face was very red. "I'm teaching you science, which is my job. Not propaganda pushed by artificial womb companies."

"That's not science," Leora said, and now everyone was staring at her. Of all the people in the classroom, Darla was probably the only one who knew that Leora's parents were neo-hippies. They were always the first to complain about students being exposed to any hint of prejudice (or religion, or ethnocentrism, or artificial food coloring) at school. And once, Leora had been just as fierce about those opinions.

That had been over a year ago, though. A year since Leora had suddenly started wearing clothes she wouldn't lend to Darla, reading magazines they had once made fun of together, making plans with popular kids—usually boys—and lying to Darla about what she was doing. It had been several months since she had even bothered lying, or been anything other than a complete stranger. But now, as Leora sat up straight and braced her hands against her chair, Darla could finally see a hint of her old friend beneath the sleek hair and heavy makeup.

"The artificial womb *is* the perfect environment for a fetus," Leora said. "No one should try to make women feel guilty for using them, or force them to go through pregnancy instead."

"Really? What do you know about pregnancy, Ms. Kalten?"

"What my mother told me." Leora flushed suddenly. "What her mother told her."

Ms. Hastim straightened, her abdomen jutting out in front of her. "I assure you, back before the artificial wombs became so popular, when *all* children were gestated the natural way, pregnancy wasn't considered such an ordeal."

"That's not," Leora said, her face still red, "what my mother said."

"Your mother has bought into corporate-influenced—" Ms. Hastim checked herself, as if suddenly realizing she had gone too far.

With that hesitation, the power balance in the classroom shifted suddenly and subtly. Leora sat up straighter. "I don't think *any* of our parents would be happy about your teaching us that their choices were wrong."

Finally Ms. Hastim turned back to the z-board. Leora slumped and, as if suddenly overwhelmed by what she had done, buried her face in her arms. Whispers rose up around the classroom, those students who had been dozing went back to sleep, and Carl went back to jabbing his pencil into Darla's back.

By the time class was over, Darla felt as if her back was a z-screen. It didn't matter; Carl wasn't in any of her other classes, and Darla wanted to talk to Leora. Or rather, to see if Leora would talk to her.

But Leora, in the hall outside the classroom, was surrounded by people. Darla leaned against a row of lockers to wait.

"You were so right!" one of Leora's hangers-on was saying loudly. "And I'm going to tell my parents what she's doing. She shouldn't be pushing her weird viewpoints on us like that."

"And that stuff she was saying about Twelvers was pure prejudice," added another boy, a tall redhead who was angling to be Leora's next boyfriend. "I mean, I don't like Twelvers any more than anyone, but that kind of talk is probably illegal."

Leora turned with a swing of long brown hair. "Why don't you like them? Have you ever met a Twelver?"

There was a moment of silence, during which the redhead's face matched his hair. Darla felt her heart expand with hope . . . even though it had done that dozens of times over the past year, every time Leora acted nice to her for three seconds or more. It was stupid, she knew; but it was also impossible to believe that the same girl she had whispered with and giggled with and had sleepovers with for almost her entire life had turned so suddenly and completely into a stranger.

There was only one solid basis for that hope: that Leora had never, despite the growing rumors, told anyone Darla's most dangerous secret.

"I don't mean I don't like them," the redhead stammered. "I mean, I think it was a mistake to gestate anyone for twelve months, and there were some negative effects, obviously. But it's not their fault."

"Really," Leora said icily. "What negative effects, exactly?"

"They didn't come out right. They've got no feelings. Everyone knows—"

The bell buzzed, and nobody got a chance to hear the redhead's version of what everyone knew. They all scattered, and for a moment Leora was alone in the hallway.

This was her opportunity, but Darla made no move toward her old best friend. She stood where she was, her throat tight.

*Everyone knows.*

The ironic thing was it wasn't true. Twelvers *had* feelings; if they didn't, Darla's stomach wouldn't be coiling itself into a small hard knot. They just didn't display stress reactions—or at least, not often. No anger or terror or loss of control in response to threats.

Too bad junior high was one long series of threats, implicit and explicit. It made her condition somewhat difficult to hide.

When Darla had been friends with Leora, it hadn't seemed to matter. But then Leora started avoiding her and all at once, everyone else began noticing how Darla never seemed to lose her temper, how being at the bottom of the popularity chain never made her cry, how she wouldn't break down no matter how hard she was bullied. She had been that way before, of course; the only thing that had changed was that now she was alone, and easy prey.

She wasn't angry at Leora, though. Confused, hurt, but not angry. She didn't get angry very easily.

Which was the entire problem—and something, thanks to Ms. Hastim's lesson, that she was going to have to work extra hard to hide.

On a cool Thursday morning, exactly as planned, Darla's parents brought home her baby brother. He was small and blotchy and bald, with wide startled blue eyes and tiny clenched fists. He weighed exactly seven and a half pounds, and Darla's parents couldn't stop exclaiming over how small he was. Darla had weighed nearly thirteen pounds when she was born.

Darla stood over the crib, staring down at her tiny, delicate brother, and couldn't bring herself to hate him. She had seen baby pictures of herself, just after delivery. Compared to Eric, she had been monstrously huge, already able to grab at things and turn herself over. This tiny bright-eyed creature was so . . . helpless.

And he almost hadn't come home that Thursday; Darla's mother had been invited to speak at a conference right after his scheduled delivery, and had suggested extending their contract so the baby would come out after the conference was over—when he was at ten months gestation. Darla's father had been adamantly opposed to the idea of leaving his son unborn for an extra month; though they tried not to argue around Darla, it wasn't difficult for the daughter who had been left unborn for an extra three months to draw the obvious conclusion.

In the end, it didn't matter. The contract was for nine months, and the company wouldn't extend it. It was autumn, a busy season for artificial wombs—people liked having their babies born in late spring—and they needed the womb-space for other clients.

Darla touched her baby brother's tiny soft hand and hoped, guiltily but fervently, that he would stay up all night and be miserable with colic and make them sorry. Darla had slept through the very first night after she was born. She had heard her mother tell the story, over and over.

Until the first reports about Twelver Syndrome came out, and her mother had never told the story again.

Darla was on her way to track practice when they jumped her. One minute she was walking down the hall, rolling her shoulders and swinging her arms; then all at once she was up against the wall, held there by a slim hand with long purple fingernails.

Her attacker was Valenzia, Carl's new girlfriend. Carl was nowhere in sight—fights in Darla's school were strictly boy vs. boy or girl vs. girl—but he might as well have been. Valenzia had never had anything against Darla before.

Behind Valenzia were three—no, four—of her friends. All tough girls, or girls who wanted to be tough. All had been involved in fistfights before. All had won those fistfights.

"I was curious," Valenzia said. "Do Twelvers know how to fight?"

Darla made no move to try and free herself. There was obviously no way to avoid getting beaten up; she was already trying to think of how to make the beating as short as possible. But most importantly, she was going to have to say nothing incriminating while they were doing it.

"I'm not a Twelver," she said.

Valenzia's lip curled, and too late, Darla realized her mistake. She shouldn't have said it. She should have screamed, or whimpered, or sobbed.

"Creep," one of the girls behind Valenzia said.

"Robot."

"Ice-brain."

"Twelver."

Valenzia's fist slammed into the side of Darla's face. Darla's head exploded with pain, and she did her best to think through it. What would a normal person do? Hit back, even though it was futile? Beg to be let alone, even though that was guaranteed to make it worse?

"I was reading about Twelvers last night," Valenzia said. "Their brains get numb during those extra three months floating around in amniotic fluid." Somehow, she managed to make it sound dirty—Valenzia excelled at making *anything* sound dirty—and the other girls all laughed.

The worst of it was that Valenzia almost had it right. Darla had read that same article just a week ago. It was pop-science, explaining things in simplistic terms: How the first three months of life were crucial for the development of infants' stress regulation mechanisms. How high stress during early infancy produced fearful, anxious children whose stress responses escalated rapidly. How when infants underwent *no* stress during those three months, the opposite happened—producing children who didn't have stress reactions at all. Who, in the face of stress, were unnaturally, weirdly, creepily calm. Twelvers.

No surprise that even Valenzia had understood the gist of it. It was the fact that she had been reading the article at all that worried Darla.

Valenzia punched her with the other hand; this time, one of her rings cut into the side of Darla's cheek, and Darla dropped to the ground. Her best option, she decided as a trickle of blood burned down her face, was to pretend they were hurting her worse than they were. She doubled over and groaned.

"What are you doing?"

Valenzia whirled. Darla looked up. Leora stood at the end of the hall, dark eyes wide. Astonishingly, she was alone. She advanced on Valenzia, her heels hitting the floor hard. "Leave her alone!"

Valenzia was almost a foot taller than Leora. She stood her ground. "Why? Are you two best friends again?"

"None of your business."

"Oh, sure, it makes sense that you'd get along with a Twelver. Someone with ice in her blood. Same reason you couldn't hold onto Carl."

Leora stopped several yards from Valenzia and raised her eyebrows. "Is that how he tells it?"

Darla, from the floor, could see clearly how Valenzia's fingers curled into a fist, how her arm muscles clenched in preparation for the blow. But hitting her boyfriend's ex would be a pretty pathetic move. It would be as much as admitting that Valenzia was afraid of Leora.

Instead, Valenzia spat on the floor. "Hang around with Twelvers," she snarled, "and people will start treating you the same soon enough." But she was turning to go even as she said it.

Darla remained on her knees until Valenzia and her friends turned the corner, then got to her feet. Leora made no move to help her up, a sensitivity Darla appreciated. She ran her tongue over her teeth and tasted blood.

Leora nodded and turned to go, and Darla felt as if she had been punched again. She spoke in pure disbelief. "That's it?"

Leora swung back. "You shouldn't be walking alone in these halls, Darla. You know what people say about you."

*What people say about you.* Darla finally voiced the suspicion she had been holding at bay for months. "And where did they hear it?"

Leora gave her a hurt look, which was so unjust that for a moment Darla couldn't speak. "Do you think I'd do that to you?"

"I don't know what to think anymore. You're one of them now. You probably hate Twelvers too."

"Oh, don't be stupid." Leora leaned back against the wall, crossing her arms over her chest.

"Then *why*?" Darla had to push the word through her thickening throat. "If it's not because I'm a Twelver, then why don't you want to be my friend anymore?" She heard, a moment too late, how pathetic that sounded.

Leora pushed herself away from the wall. "Grow up, Darla. Things change, that's all."

"I didn't change!"

"Maybe that's exactly the problem." Leora made an irritated motion with her hand. "I don't want to talk about it."

"Why? Am I making you feel guilty?"

"No! I would never bother feeling guilty about you. I would never bother feeling anything about you!"

"Then why are you yelling?" Darla asked.

Leora glared at her, then spun on her heel and strode away down the hall.

Darla told her parents she had accidentally bruised her cheek in gym class, and they believed her. They made a fuss about it anyhow, because all their parenting books warned them about the dangers of neglecting an older child. Darla found the extra attention annoying.

And the truth was, Eric didn't take up a lot of her parents' time. He was a perfect baby, content to lie on his play mat and stare at dangling toys for hours at a time. He stopped waking up at night when he was one month old, which made Darla feel irrationally that she had lost some sort of race; at one month, she hadn't even been in the running. He smiled at five weeks and laughed at two months. Her parents certainly had no reason for regrets.

Not about him.

The examination of Darla's cheek was brought to an end by Eric's screams. A few days ago, he had learned how to crawl by wriggling himself backward across the living room carpet. As usual, this ended with him backing himself under the couch, realizing that he was stuck, and bursting into panic-stricken wails.

"You never used to do that," Darla's mother said, as she hurried across the room to scoop him up. "You would just look around, figure out what you'd done, and try to turn around until you were clear. You would only cry if you couldn't manage it on your own."

She said it proudly; but Darla's father pressed his lips together, and Darla felt her eyes sting. She touched one finger to the throbbing bump on her cheek and looked away.

The next day, when Darla was walking to her seat in history class, someone tripped her. She sprawled face-first on the floor between the rows of desks, her backpack hitting the back of her neck with a thud that went all the way down her spine. Pens and books and papers spilled everywhere. She lay for a moment on the dirty tiled floor, gauging the situation; she could sense the unified malice around her, and



knew that as soon as she tried to get up, someone would push her down. On the other hand, she couldn't just stay on the floor until a teacher showed up. She tried to think of another option.

"Doesn't seem too bothered, does she?" Carl snickered, and she felt as if she had been given a blow to the stomach more painful than the bruise on her neck. She stood up abruptly, too fast for anyone to push her, but not before another voice whispered, "Twelver. No point trying to hide it—we *know*."

She should have looked for who it was, should have been watching for the next shove. Instead her eyes sought out Leora, who was perched on her desk on the other side of the classroom. One look at Leora's cold, defensive expression was enough to tell Darla what had happened.

For a moment she felt as if she couldn't breathe; it was as if she had turned to ice. Then, all at once, everything was hot. This wasn't a threat, it was a betrayal, and she reacted the way any normal kid would.

Darla Tappin lost her temper.

It didn't make her suddenly powerful, or impressive, or even normal. What it made her—a phenomenon she had observed in others many times—was stupid. She turned to face Leora and snapped, "I promised I wouldn't tell anyone about *you*."

There was a moment of frozen silence. Darla's voice carried so much conviction that several people turned to stare at Leora with horrified shock, but Darla didn't have time to feel gratified before her brain caught up with her. Leora could disprove it in a second. Call up a copy of her birth records on her z-pad and show everyone that Darla was a liar.

But Leora did no such thing. She stood there, looking back at Darla, face blank with shock and betrayal.

But Darla *hadn't* betrayed her. Unless. . . .

It made no sense. Leora erupted into rage or tears at least twice a week. She acted nothing like a Twelver. Unless she was better at faking it than Darla was. Or unless . . .

Unless Leora had a reason for being so sure there was nothing really different about Twelvers.

"Unbelievable—we've got *two* of them," someone said, and someone else laughed. Then Ms. Hastim entered the classroom, and everyone took their seats. Ms. Hastim turned to pull up the z-board, pressing one hand to the small of her back, and Leora shot Darla a look so vicious it should have seared the skin right off her face.

Darla looked back at her and, slowly and deliberately, smiled.

Everyone in class took notice. A sub-audible murmur rose up around them.

"Quiet," Ms. Hastim snapped. Then she stopped, winced, and put her hand on her distended abdomen.

The entire class gasped collectively. Ms. Hastim took a deep breath, then straightened and continued with her lesson—a boring study of the circulatory system that she had started, rather sullenly, once parents began complaining about her propagandizing to their children.

Darla watched intensely, but nothing else happened. When class ended with Ms. Hastim's baby still firmly stuck inside her, she felt a mixture of relief and disappointment.

But the next morning, there was a substitute teacher in Ms. Hastim's place. The students glanced at each other uneasily as he began calling up microscope images on the z-board, but no one wanted to ask. There was a good chance that whoever asked would be teased about it for days.

When the substitute turned to face the class, Darla decided that stupid jokes about natural childbirth would be a nice change from stupid jokes about Twelvers. She raised her hand. "Is Ms. Hastim sick?"



"Ms. Hastim gave birth," the substitute said.

Scandalized giggles rippled through the class. Darla frowned, counting in her mind. "She said she wouldn't go on maternity leave until next semester."

"The baby came early." The substitute wasn't even trying to hide his disgust, though Darla suspected there would be no parental complaints this time. "That's the kind of thing that can happen when babies are gestated naturally. There was no warning, either, which will make it very difficult for me to get the rest of your lessons in order."

That caused some grins, and a flurry of whispers began as soon as the substitute turned his back. Darla didn't participate—not that anyone would have invited or welcomed her participation. She sat perfectly still, staring at the images on the z-board without seeing them, seeing instead the simple explanation that made sense of everything. With a careful controlled movement, she turned her head and looked at Leora.

Leora's face was slightly pink, and she sat every bit as still as Darla did. Darla kept looking at her, until the force of her gaze pulled Leora's head reluctantly around. Leora drew in her breath, chin trembling. And Darla smiled.

Darla waited two days—long enough to let Leora begin thinking that maybe she had imagined that silent exchange, that maybe Darla didn't really know anything. She waited until she found Leora sitting alone at a table in the cafeteria. Darla slid onto the bench; and, when Leora raised her head in outrage, said quietly, "Are you a Sevens or an Eights?"

Leora's fork clattered onto the table. Darla picked up the fork, handed it back to Leora, and said, "I knew you weren't a Twelves. But I only now figured out why you wouldn't show your records to prove it."

Leora took the fork and stared at it as if she didn't know what to do with it.

"Bad enough that it would show you gestated inside your mother," Darla went on conversationally. "I mean, that's just gross. But you came out too early, too. What did they used to say about babies like that?"

"Nothing," Leora whispered, still looking at the fork. "They didn't say anything. They didn't even have words like Sevens and Eights. They didn't care."

"How nice that must have been," Darla said.

Leora dug her fork into her mashed potatoes, then left it there and looked at Darla. "Why are you *happy*?"

Darla realized that she was smiling. She curled in her upper lip, trying to stop; but when she opened her mouth to speak, the smile broke free. She couldn't help it. She leaned forward. "Because it's so obvious that you're not—that there's nothing wrong with you. And since we're the same—"

"We are *not* the same," Leora snarled, and Darla felt her smile go flat. She sat back, blinking.

"But you just—"

"It's weird and it's gross," Leora said. "But it's not the same as being a Twelves. You really *are* different. You can't even pretend to be the same as everyone else, no matter how hard you try. You should just stop trying."

The silence between them was long and hot. Ridiculously, Leora was the one blinking back tears; Darla sat dry-eyed and dry-mouthed, the pain inside her all rolled up. "All right," she said.

Leora let go of the fork. "What?"

"All right. I'll stop trying."

Leora watched her with large dark eyes, trapped and panicked; like Eric's when he backed himself under the couch.

"I don't care whether or not you're my friend." The lie was easy; Darla knew Leora would believe it. "But what you're going to do from now on—if you don't want everyone to know what you are—is *act* like my friend. Sit with me at lunch. Talk to me after class. Don't *ever* look at me as if I don't deserve to exist."

Leora lowered her mascara-laden eyes. Darla got to her feet.

"I'll give you time to get used to the idea." She felt something thick and sad rise in her throat, and spoke around it. "We'll start tomorrow."

She watched Leora's eyes narrow in helpless fury. Watched the word *Twelver* form on her parted lips.

Watched her swallow the word and leave it unsaid.

"See you then," Darla said. She walked away, through the sea of faces and out into the hall. She didn't bother turning to see whether Leora was watching her go. ○

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My prediction is that,  
     if you sit a million monkeys  
     at a million typewriters  
     for a million years,  
     you'll just end up  
     with a lot of monkey junk  
     all over your rebuilt Smith-Coronas—that,  
     and a big banana bill.

And they won't  
     change the ribbons  
     as often as they should—if,  
     of course, at all.

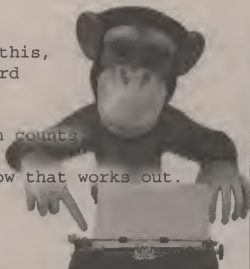
So—no Shakespeare, no Hemingway—  
     not even Judy Blume.

Now, I don't have the math  
     or the millions—  
     OR the time—to prove this,  
     but I'm going on record  
     here and now anyway:  
     no Shakespeare.

And esp. not—if punctuation counts

So, you know—let me know how that works out.

—W. Gregory Stewart



# Gene's Dreams

Between the stunned vacuum  
after Jack Kennedy's murder  
and the astonishment of our  
men walking on their moon,

the small screen showed big dreams,  
once a week. Kirk with his odd  
postures, Spock with his eyebrows,  
and the rest of the gang  
with their earnest hopes

and the writers with their  
earnest hopes, and the directors,  
the producers, all wishing

that their futures might cure  
the present.

If I'd been a child that year  
instead of a soldier in the mud  
would I have played the pointy-eared  
explainer, the foil? Or the hero  
with his gun and girdled gut?

We should all of us be Mister Spock.  
who always kept his cool,  
and found the whole world  
fascinating.

—Joe Haldeman

Bruce McAllister has brought back into print his 1989 science fiction novel, *Dream Baby* ([www.dreambabynovel.com](http://www.dreambabynovel.com))—based on the novelette that was a Hugo- and Nebula-Award finalist—because people seem interested in reading it again. He's happy to report that the book's trailer/teaser (a short film by his son Ben) went viral at *YouTube*. Bruce has fantasy and SF short stories forthcoming in *Albedo One*, *Asimov's*, *Cemetery Dance*, and a "re-defining" urban fantasy anthology to be edited by Peter S. Beagle and Joe R. Landsdale for Tachyon. In his latest tale for us, time travel gives a man a brief opportunity to be . . .

# THE MESSENGER

Bruce McAllister

I go to see my parents yesterday. They're thirty-five. I'm fifty. This kind of thing is easy with the Non-Paradoxical Time Channel you subscribe to if you've got the money for a portal and don't mind spending real-time in the past. I just haven't done it before. When you've got your own kids, you prioritize: Your parents already raised you, and now your children need you to raise them.

They're living in a house I don't remember. I don't remember ever seeing stills or video of it either—because that's where it probably happened, and my father didn't want reminders. A big Spanish thing—a century old at least—two stories, courtyard, fan palms, terracotta tiles. The kind my mother would have loved, I know, and that my father, a successful partner in a big product-liability law firm, could have afforded. He did love her, I tell myself.

Don't know why the big pots on the travertine patio by the front door catch my eye, but I'm leaning over, trying to figure out why someone's let the flowers in them die, when I look up and there's my mother walking up the steps toward me in slacks and a red blouse. I've seen the pics from their wedding, one vacation video from a little later, and all sorts of childhood and college shots of her (in those bright red dresses she loved); so I know her even if I don't remember her.

I stand up, nervous. I smile. There are lots of people around, going up and down the steps, grabbing things from vans and trucks—as if they're getting ready for a party or fixing the house to sell it. She glances at me. Just once. No reason she should recognize me—I haven't even been born—though maybe she'll think I look familiar, like the men from my father's family. But, no, she glances at me once and walks by.

As she passes, time slows a little—just a little—and I see that distant look in her face, that unhappiness you could see in those snapshots from college. (I'm thinking of one where she's sitting on a park bench in winter, not looking at the photographer; and another, on the deck of a boat owned by her father, looking into the distance too.) A look you'd only know the importance of if you could see the future.

Remember, this is my first time. Some people who've had the channel for years—they get good at it. They have fun with their parents—who don't recognize them (since they haven't been born yet.)—socializing, getting drunk with them, even pulling childish pranks on them for the hell of it. They have fun because they know it won't change anything. It can't. It's Non-Paradoxical. Anything they do is already in the temporal loop.

Or they visit for weeks, even months if they can afford it, become neighbors, close friends, or just strangers watching from a distance, trying to get over grievances and hurts, feeling whatever love they can, understanding better the two people who brought them into this world. And they always come back wiser, make conversation of it in the present, even art, write about it, publish the writing, or at least carry it back to their children as the miracle it is—the wonder of it.

All in the loop, of course. Pre-set.

If you actually went to *change* things—say, to tell your mother lies about your father so she'd marry someone else, so you wouldn't be born because you hate your life in the present—you wouldn't be able to do it. Something would always get in your way no matter how many times you tried.

Time is ingenious.

But this is my first time, and I've got something I need to do. Loop or no loop.

I head up the stairs and into the house. It doesn't feel like a dream at all. It's real, and I'm seeing it as I never would as a child. It has to be preparations for a party, I tell myself. Workmen are fixing a mantelpiece in the living room and oh-so-perky men and women in black and white uniforms, who've got to be caterers, are setting things up in the dining room.

In the kitchen a man I know—I know his back even in a shirt I've never seen him in—turns from a workman he's talking to and looks at me, wondering what I want, who I am if I'm not in a uniform and don't have tools in my hands.

Those brown eyes and long lashes. I see them in the mirror every morning, but the face before me is thirty-five, not fifty. It's not mine.

"I—" I start, but don't know what to say, so I blurt out a stupid: "I just saw Mom."

When a fifty-year-old man—one you've never seen before—maybe there's something familiar about him, maybe not (he looks like your Louisiana uncles?)—stands in front of you and says, "I just saw Mom," you don't hear the word. He couldn't possibly have said it. He must have said, "I just saw *Don*?" or "I just saw *Tom*?"

"What?" he asks. Not annoyed. Always his calm self. Just a little puzzled.

I think fast and say, "Sorry to intrude like this, but I need to talk to Theresa about a school matter."

He's looking at me like he should know me, but doesn't, but should pretend he does. I know her name, after all, and I've said "school." I'm someone from where she teaches, down at St. Mary's—isn't that where she taught the year before I was born?

"Sure," he says.

He's decided he doesn't need to recognize me. I'm new to the school. He's never met me, and if I'm rude not to introduce myself, so what? He's busy. If I've driven over instead of calling to talk school matters with her, it's because teachers are that way. "Touchy-feely," as he always put it. "About as far from attorneys as you can get, Tim."

"She's not feeling well," he says. I know what this means. I can hear the weight of it in his voice. "But you'll find her upstairs probably. I'm Jim, Theresa's husband," he adds, holding out his hand.

I take his hand as I've taken it so often, and I say it—my real name. "I'm Timothy."

I wait. Nothing. I turn to leave as he turns too—back to the workman.

It will be the name they use, yes, but he'll forget this meeting. I'll ask him when

he's old and dying, and he'll say he doesn't remember, and he won't. Maybe it's my saying it that does it, maybe not. Maybe the name is already in him—in them both—a name they love—so they use it. However it happens, it's set.

I find her in the hallway upstairs, looking dazed. Someone is leaving her when I approach—another workman with paint on his pants, looking puzzled, as if she's said something that made no sense.

I stand in front of her, and, sure, I'm making her look at me. I want her to look at me even if she doesn't understand why, even if she'll forget this moment.

She looks pretty in her red blouse, vulnerable with eyes that won't stay still. The faint Asian fold of her eyelids—those are from her mother. I understand now why he loves her. Always did and always will. I wish I had her eyes.

"Do you love him?" I say.

"What?" Her eyes stop on me now, though it's difficult. They've always needed to be somewhere else. The old photographs don't lie.

"Do you love him, Theresa?"

"Who are you?"

"I think you know." If anyone could see the truth with those flitting eyes, it would be her. I've known this for a long time. It's one of the reasons I'm here.

She cocks her head, peers at me, touches her collar nervously, drops her hand in self-consciousness, and takes a breath.

"Perhaps I do . . ." she says at last.

She stares at me. A faint smile appears on her lips, passes, then she says:

"When I look past things around me . . ."

"Yes?"

"When I look past things around me, I see people. People like you."

"I know, Mother."

She doesn't jerk at the word. She *knows*.

"I don't know whether they're real or not, but I see them. . . ."

"Yes, you do."

"It's difficult to be here . . . in the way I should be here."

I nod.

"With him, I mean. . . ."

"Yes. . . ."

"How can you be real?" she asks suddenly. "You aren't here yet, and perhaps you'll never be. . . ."

"It doesn't matter, Mother. I'm here and I'm sorry, but I've got two questions. . . ."

"The one you just asked?"

"That's one."

"Do I love him?"

I nod.

She closes her eyes. "Sometimes I think I do. . . . And sometimes I think I can't love anyone, not here in this world."

"But that isn't his fault, is it." I don't say it as a question.

"No. It isn't."

I take a deep breath and ask the harder one:

"If you do what you're thinking of doing—"

"Yes?"

"—it won't be because you don't love him, right? That won't be the reason, right?"

"No, it won't, Tim."

I do it—I jerk. Of course I do. She knows who I am, and to hear my name from her voice is like an old, old dream.

"He loves you," I blurt.

"I know. . . . I just don't want to be here anymore. Can you understand that?"

I can't, but I nod.

They'll have me in the hope that it will make her happy—happy enough not to leave this life—but it won't.

"I have a favor to ask of you, too, Mother," I hear myself say. "Just one."

She finds this funny and smiles. "Yes?"

"That you not do it—that you not do what you're thinking of doing—until I am born. . . ."

It's a silly thing to ask. I was born and am talking to her now, so it was already done, in the loop, settled; but I say it because it feels good to—as if we both have the power, we both can decide it together—that I should be born. Something that lovers would decide.

Her eyes aren't dancing away. They're looking at me as if I'm really here, and there's a kindness in them—one that's not in the photographs—one that is unbearable.

"Of course not," she says, almost laughing.

"I'd never do that," she adds.

For a moment I want to step to her and take her in my arms—because I never have, though she must have held me those first six months. But that would be awkward. I'd want to stay, which would be impossible.

I kiss her on the forehead—that's all I do—and as I leave she's already gone, looking at the window's bright light at the end of the hallway.

That evening, instead of having dinner with Daphne and our daughters and whisking them away to the Halloween carnival at the school where I teach, as I do every year, I go to the hospital to see him. We'll be taking him to hospice care the next day (there are some things money can't buy, and he'd be the first to say it—and often does), but I want to spend the night with my father, just him and me, the way it's always been.

"Well?" he says, IV tubing rustling at his wrists like toy snakes, his voice no louder than the thing growing in his chest, stomach, and liver will allow.

Those brown eyes again, and the lashes. She'd have loved them the first time she saw them.

I take a breath.

"You weren't the reason," I tell him.

He nods, but he needs the other too.

"Of course she loved you," I say.

He looks at me, and it takes a great effort. He isn't sure—I can tell from his eyes. It's hard to give up a fifty-year-old fear, one that feels just like the thing eating at your body now.

"Would you lie to me, Tim?"

I look at him and hold his eyes. "No, I wouldn't. You just feel bad that she did it, felt it was your fault, which it wasn't; feel bad that you lived on when she couldn't, and so you doubt what I'm saying because you've doubted yourself for so long."

"Nice speech."

I manage a smile. "I've been practicing, Dad."

"You were always good at that." He coughs. He's always coughing. "Making people feel good, I mean."

He's right, of course. I'd have lied.

I keep smiling. What else can I do?

"I'd have gone myself, you know," he says. "But I couldn't."

He means his body, that he can't walk, but he also means—and he wants me to un-



derstand this—that he couldn't stand seeing her *alive*—he just couldn't. But he's forgotten the other thing, too, because he wants to—because he wanted it to be his choice: You can't visit a time after you're born. There can't be two of you. The portal won't let you through.

"I know, Dad," I tell him. And I do. It's hard thinking all those years that you weren't important enough to keep someone in this world. And it's hard thinking you're the only one who can see past the things around you to people who aren't there, but might be some day.

He lies back, tired, and doesn't close his eyes. When I come back from the nurse's station with the little folding cot, so I can stay the night, his eyes are still open, but they're no longer unsure. He's remembering what she was like when she was here—*really* here—and it does feel like love.

And isn't that the point? To do what we need to do to help them. To help them believe, I mean.

Before they leave.

Whether it's in the loop or not. ○

## NEXT ISSUE

### AUGUST ISSUE

Our August lead story gives you the chance to revisit Majipoor with science fiction Grand Master, **Robert Silverberg**. While all may not be going well, at "The End of the Line," you'll find it's the same evocative world that inspired the author's blockbuster bestseller. In our cover story by **Lisa Goldstein**, Elizabethan spies, Arab scholars, and Japanese homunculi reveal why "Paradise Is a Walled Garden."

### ALSO IN AUGUST

**Will Ludwigsen** returns to our pages with an offbeat tale about why "We Were Wonder Scouts"; World Fantasy Award winner **Melanie Tem** takes a harrowing look at a little girl's "Corn Teeth"; new author **Zachary Jernigan's** "Pairs" offers us hope (and revenge) during humanity's darkest hour; another new author, **Philip Brewer**, gives us a stinging tale about how to recover from the end of life as we know it in "Watch Bees"; and Hugo and Nebula winner **Michael Swanwick** breaks our hearts as only he can in "For I Have Lain Me Down on the Stone of Loneliness and I'll Not be Back Again."

### OUR EXCITING FEATURES

**Robert Silverberg's** "Reflections" column reveals why "Earth Is the Strangest Place"; **Peter Heck** contributes "On Books"; plus we'll have an array of poetry and other features you're sure to enjoy. Look for our August issue on sale at newsstands on June 21, 2011. Or you can subscribe to *Asimov's*—in paper format or in downloadable varieties—by visiting us online at [www.asimovs.com](http://www.asimovs.com). We're also available individually or by subscription on *Amazon.com's* Kindle, *BarnesandNoble.com's* Nook, and *ebookstore.sony.com's* eReader!

# THE COPENHAGEN INTERPRETATION

Paul Cornell

With nominations for two *Doctor Who* episodes, “Father’s Day” and “Human Nature”/“The Family of Blood”; a comic, *Captain Britain and MI-13: Vampire State*; and a novelette, “One of Our Bastards Is Missing,” Paul Cornell is the only person to be a Hugo finalist in all three media. Paul’s thrilling new tale of daring espionage in a timeline somewhat different from our own is his first story for *Asimov’s* and his third in a series concerning Jonathan Hamilton. Paul is also the author of two novels, *Something More* and *British Summertime*, from Gollancz. A third book will be coming out from Tor in 2012.

The best time to see Kastellet is in the evening, when the ancient fortifications are alight with glow worms, a landmark for anyone gazing down on the city as they arrive by carriage. Here stands one of Copenhagen’s great parks, its defense complexes, including the home of the Forsvarets Efterretningstjeneste, and a single windmill, decorative rather than functional. The wind comes in hard over the Langelinie, and after the sun goes down, the skeleton of the whale that’s been grown into the ground resonates in sympathy and gives out a howl that can be heard in Sweden.

Hamilton had arrived on the diplomatic carriage, without papers, and, as etiquette demanded, without weapons or folds, thoroughly out of uniform. He watched the carriage heave itself up into the darkening sky above the park, and bank off to the southwest, swaying in the wind, sliding up the fold it made under its running boards. He was certain every detail was being registered by the FLV. You don’t look into the diplomatic bag, but you damn well know where the bag goes. He left the park through the healed bronze gates and headed down a flight of steps toward the diplomatic quarter, thinking of nothing. He did that when there were urgent questions he couldn’t answer, rather than run them round and round in his head and let them wear away at him.

The streets of Copenhagen. Ladies and gentlemen stepping from carriages, the occasional tricolor of feathers on a hat or, worse, once, tartan over a shoulder. Hamilton found himself reacting, furious. But then he saw it was Campbell. The wearer, a youth in evening wear, was the sort of fool who heard an accent in a bar and took up anything apparently forbidden, in impotent protest against the world. And thus got fleeced by Scotsmen.

He was annoyed at his anger. He had failed to contain himself.

He walked past the façade of the British embassy, with the Hanoverian regiment on guard, turned a corner and waited in one of those convenient dark streets that form the second map of diplomatic quarters everywhere in the world. After a moment, a door with no external fittings swung open and someone ushered him inside and took his coat.

"The girl arrived at the front door, in some distress. She spoke to one of our Hanoverians, Private Glassman, and became agitated when he couldn't understand her. Then she seems to have decided that none of us should understand her. We tried to put her through the observer inside the hallway, but she wouldn't hear of it." The ambassador was Bayoumi, a Musselman with grey in his beard. Hamilton had met him once before, at a ball held in a palace balanced on a single wave, grown out of the ocean and held there to mark the presence of royalty from three of the great powers. He had been exactly gracious, as he had to be, making his duty appear weightless. In this place, perhaps that was what he took it to be.

"So she could be armed?" Hamilton had made himself sit down, and now he was focusing on the swirls of lacquered gunwood on the surface of the ambassador's desk.

"She *could* be folded like origami."

"You're sure of the identification?"

"Well . . ." Hamilton recognized that moment when the diplomatic skills of a continental ambassador unfolded themselves. At least they were present. "Major, if we can, I'd like to get through this without compromising the girl's dignity—"

Hamilton cut him off. "Your people trusted nothing to the courier except a name and *assume* the EM out of here's compromised." Which was shoddy to the point of terrifying. "What?"

The ambassador let out a sigh. "I make it a point," he said, "never to ask a lady her age."

They had kept her in the entrance hallway and closed the embassy to all other business that day. Eventually, they had extended the embassy's security bunker to the hallway, created a doorway into it by drilling out the wall, and set up a small room for her inside it. She was separated from the rest of the embassy by a fold, which had light pushed through it, so Hamilton could watch her on an intelligent projection that took up much of a wall in one of the building's many unused office spaces.

Hamilton saw her face, and found he was holding his breath. "Let me in there."

"But if—"

"If she kills me nobody will care. Which is why she won't."

He walked into the room made of space, with a white sheen on the walls for the visual comfort of those inside. He closed the door behind him.

She looked at him. Perhaps she started to recognize him. She wavered with uncertainty.

He sat down opposite her.

She reacted as his gaze took her in, aware that he wasn't looking at her as a stranger should look at a lady. Perhaps that was tipping her toward recognition. Not that that would necessarily be a sign of anything.

The body was definitely that of Lustre Saint Clair: bobbed hair; full mouth; the affectation of spectacles; those warm, hurt eyes.

But she couldn't be more than eighteen. The notes in his eyes confirmed it, beyond all cosmetic possibility.

This was the Lustre Saint Clair he'd known. The Lustre Saint Clair from *fifteen years ago*.

"Is it you?" she said. In Enochian. In Lustre's voice.

He had been fourteen, having left Cork for the first time, indentured in the 4<sup>th</sup> Dragoons because of his father's debt, proud to finally be able to pay it through his service. He'd had the corners knocked off him and had yet to gain new ones at Keble. Biliated in Warminster, he had been every inch the Gentleman Cadet, forced to find a common society with the other ranks, who tended to laugh at the aristocracy of his Irish accent. They were always asking how many Tories he'd killed, and he'd never found an answer. Years later, he'd come to think he should have told the truth and said two and seen if that would shock them. He'd been acutely conscious of his virginity.

Lustre had been one of the young ladies it was acceptable for him to be seen with in town. Her being older than he was had appealed to Hamilton very much. Especially since she was reticent, shy, unable to overawe him. That had allowed him to be bold. Too bold, on occasion. They were always seeing and then not seeing each other. She was on his arm at dances, with no need of a card on three occasions, and then supposedly with some other cadet. But Hamilton had always annoyed Lustre by not taking those other suitors seriously, and she had always come back to him. The whole idiocy had taken less than three months, his internal calendar now said, incredibly. But it was years written in stone.

He had never been sure if she was even slightly fond of him until the moment she had initiated him into the mysteries. And they had even fought that night. But they had at least been together after that, for a while, awkward and fearful as that had been.

Lustre was a secretary for Lord Surtees, but she had told Hamilton, during that night of greater intimacy, that this was basically a lie, that she was also a courier, that in her head was the seed for a diplomatic language, that sometimes she would be asked to speak the words that made it grow into her, and then she would know no other language, and be foreign to all countries apart from the dozen people in court and government with whom she could converse. In the event of capture, she would say other words, or her package would force them on her, and she would be left with a language, in thought and memory as well as in speech, spoken by no other, which any other would be unable to learn, and she would be like that unto death, which, cut off from the sum of mankind that made the balance as she would be, would presumably and hopefully soon follow.

She'd said this to him as if she was making an observation about the weather. Not with the detachment that Hamilton had come to admire in his soldiers, but with a fatalism that made him feel sick that night and afraid. He hadn't known whether to believe her. It had been her seeming certainty of how she would end, that night, that had made him react, raise his voice, drag them back into one of their endless grindings of not yet shaped person on person. But in the weeks that followed, he had come to half appreciate those confidences, shrugging aside the terrible burden she put on him, and her weakness in doing so, if it all was true, because of the wonder of her.

He had done many more foolish and terrible things while he was a cadet. Every now and then he supposed he should have regrets. But what was the point? And yet here was the one thing he hadn't done. He hadn't left that little room above the inn and gone straight back to the barracks and asked for an interview with Lieutenant Rashid and told him that this supposed lady had felt able to share the secret of her status. He hadn't done it in all the weeks after.

The one thing he hadn't done, and, like some Greek fate or the recoil from a prayer too few, here it was back for him.

Six months later, Lustre Saint Clair, after she'd followed His Lordship back to London and stopped returning Hamilton's letters, had vanished.

He'd only heard of it because he'd recognized a friend of hers at some ball, had distracted the lady on his arm and gone to pay his respects, and had heard of tears and horrors and none of the girls in Surtees' employ knowing what had become of her.

He'd hidden his reaction then. And ever after. He'd made what inquiries he could. Almost none. He'd found the journals for that day on his plate, and located something about a diplomatic incident between the Court of Saint James's and the Danes, both blaming the other for a "misunderstanding" that the writer of the piece was duty bound not to go into in any more detail, but was surely the fault of typical Danish whimsy. Reading between the lines, it was clear that something had been lost, possibly a diplomatic bag. Presumably that bag had contained or been Lustre. And then his regiment had suddenly mustered and he'd been dragged away from it all.

For months, years, it had made him feel sick, starting with a great and sudden fear there at his desk. It had stayed his burden and only gradually declined. But nothing had come of it. As he had risen in the ranks, and started to do out of uniform work, he had quieted his conscience by assuring himself that he had had no concrete detail to impart to his superiors. She had been loose-lipped and awkward with the world. This is not evidence, these are feelings.

That had been the whole of it until that morning. When he had heard her name again, out of Turpin's mouth, when Hamilton had been standing in his office off Horseguards Parade.

That name, and her seeming return after fifteen years of being assumed dead.

Hamilton had concealed the enormity of his reaction. He was good at that now. His Irish blood was kept in an English jar.

At last he had heard the details he had carefully never asked about since he'd started doing out of uniform work. All those years ago, Lustre had been sent to Copenhagen on a routine information exchange, intelligence deemed too sensitive to be trusted to the embroidery or anything else that was subject to the whims of man and God. Turpin hadn't told him what the information was, only that it had been marked For Their Majesties, meaning that only the crowned heads of specific great powers and their chosen advisors could hear it. Lustre had been set down in one of the parks, met by members of the Politiets Efterretningstjeneste, and walked to Amalienborg Palace. Presumably. Because she and they never got there. They had simply not arrived, and after an hour of Dansk *laissez faire*, in which time it was presumably thought they might have gone to the pub or had a spot of lunch, the alarms had begun. Nothing had ever been found. There were no witnesses. It had been a perfect abduction, if that was what it was.

The great powers had panicked, Turpin had said. They'd expected the balance to collapse, for war to follow shortly. Armies across the continent and Solar System had been dispatched to ports and carriage posts. Hamilton remembered that sudden muster, that his regiment had been sent to kick the mud off their boots in Portsmouth. Which soon had turned into just another exercise. Turpin's predecessor had lost his job as a result of the affair, and shortly after that his life, in a hunting accident that was more of the former than the latter.

Hamilton had known better, this morning, than to say that whatever was in Lustre's head must have extraordinary value, for it to mean the end of the sacred trust of all those in public life, the end of everything. The thought of it had made him feel sick again, tugging on a thread that connected the import of what she'd carried to her willingness to talk.

"Is this matter," he'd asked, "still as sensitive?"

Turpin had nodded. "That's why I'm sending you. And why you're going to be

briefed with Enochian. We presume that'll be all she's able to speak, or that's what we hope, and you're going to need to hear what she has to say and act on it there and then. The alternative would be to send a force to get her out of there, and, as of this hour, we're not quite ready to invade Denmark."

His tone had suggested no irony. It was said mad old King Frederik was amused by the idea of his state bringing trouble to the great powers. That he had aspirations to acquisitions in the Solar System beyond the few small rocks that currently had Dansk written through them like bacon.

The warmth of Turpin's trust had supported Hamilton against his old weakness. He'd taken on the language and got into the carriage to cross stormy waters, feeling not prayed for enough, yet unwilling to ask for it, fated and ready to die.

And so here she was. Or was she?

Was she a grown homunculus, with enough passing memory to recognize him? And speak Enochian too? No, surely that was beyond what could be stuffed into such a foul little brain. And assigning such personhood to such an object was beneath even the depths to which the Heeresnachrichtenamt would sink. Was she a real person with grown features to suggest young Lustre? That was entirely possible. But what was the point, when she'd be suspected immediately? Why not make her look the age she was supposed to be?

"Yes," he said in Enochian. "It's me."

"Then . . . it's true, God's-seen-it. What's been obvious since I . . . since I got back."

"Back from where?"

"They said someone with authority was coming to see me. Is that you?"

"Yes."

She looked as if she could hardly believe it. "I need protection. Once we're back in Britain—"

"Not until I know—"

"You know as well as I do that this room, this building—!"

"On the way in, when this was a hallway, why didn't you let yourself be observed?"

She took a breath and her mouth formed into a thin line. And suddenly they were back fighting again. Fools. Still. With so much at stake.

He should have told them. They should have sent someone else.

"Listen," she said, "how long has it been since you last saw me?"

"Decade and a half, give or take."

He saw the shock on her face again. It was as if she kept getting hurt by the same thing. By the echoes of it. "I saw the dates when I got out. I couldn't believe it. For me it's been . . . four years . . . or . . . no time at all, really."

Hamilton was certain there was nothing that could do this. He shook his head, putting the mystery aside for a moment. "Is the package safe?"

"Typical you, to gallop round. Yes! That's why I didn't take the observer machine! Those things have a reputation, particularly one here. It might have set me babbling."

But that was also what a homunculus or a cover would say. He found he was scowling at her. "Tell me what happened. Everything."

But then a small sound came from beside them. Where a sound couldn't be. It was like a heavy item of furniture being thumped against the wall.

Lustre startled, turned to look—

Hamilton leapt at her.

He felt the sudden fire flare behind him.

And then he was falling upward, sideways, back down again!

He landed and threw himself sidelong to grab Lustre as she was falling up out of her chair, as it was crashing away from her. The room was battering at his eyes,



milky fire, arcing rainbows. Two impact holes, half the chamber billowing from each. An explosion was rushing around the walls toward them.

A shaped charge, Hamilton thought in the part of his mind that was fitted to take apart such things and turn them round, with a fold in the cone to demolish artificially curved space.

Whoever they were, they wanted Lustre or both of them alive.

Hamilton grabbed her round the shoulders and threw her at the door.

She burst it open and stumbled into the sudden gravity of the corridor beyond. He kicked his heels on the spinning chair, and dived through after her.

He fell onto the ground, hard on his shoulder, rolled to his feet, and jumped to slam the door behind them. It did its duty and completed the fold seconds before the explosion rolled straight at it.

There was nobody waiting for them in the hallway.

So they'd been about to enter the fold through the holes they'd blown? They might have found their corpses. It was a mistake, and Hamilton didn't like to feel that his enemy made mistakes. He'd rather assume he was missing something.

He had no gun.

Alarms started up in distant parts of the building. The corridor, he realized, was filling with smoke from above.

There came the sound of running feet, coming down the stairs from above them.

Friend or foe? No way to tell.

The attack had come from outside, but there might have been inside help, might now be combatants pouring in. The front door had held, but then it had been folded to distraction. If they knew enough to use that charge, they might not have even tried it.

Lustre was looking at the only door they could reach before the running feet reached them. It had a sign on it that Hamilton's Danish notations read as "cellar."

He threw himself back at the wall, then charged it with his foot. Non-grown wood burst around the lock. He kicked it out. The damage would be seen. He was betting on it not mattering. He swung open the door and found steps beyond. Lustre ran inside, and he closed the door behind them.

He tried a couple of shadowy objects and found something he could lift and put against the door. A tool box. They were in a room of ancient boilers, presumably a back-up if the fuel cells failed.

"They'll find—!" Lustre began. But she immediately quieted herself.

He quickly found what he had suspected might be down here, a communications station on the wall. Sometimes when he was out of uniform he carried a small link to the embroidery, usually disguised as a watch to stop anyone from wondering what sort of person would have something like that. But he would never be allowed to bring such kit into a supposedly friendly country. The link on the wall was an internal system. He could only hope it connected to the link on the roof. He could and should have called the FLV. But he couldn't afford to trust the locals now. He couldn't have their systems register an honest call to Buckingham Palace or the building off Horseguards Parade. That would be a sin against the balance. So there was now only one person he could call. If she wasn't in her boudoir, he was dead and Lustre was back in the bag.

He tapped on the connector and blew the right notes into the receiver, hopefully letting the intelligent sound he was connecting to push past any listening ears.

To his relief, Cushion McKenzie came straight on the line, sounding urgent. Someone in the Palace might have tipped her off as to where he was tonight. "Johnny, what can I do for you?" Her voice came from the roof, the direction reserved for officers.

"Social call for papa." He could hear the running feet coming along the corridor toward the door. Would they miss the damage in the gathering smoke?



"Extract, package, or kill?"

Kill meant him, a stroke that would take his life and erase what he knew, painlessly, he was assured. It was the only way an out of uniform officer could choose to die, self-murder being an option denied to the kit stowed in their heads. Cushion represented herself on the wider shores of the public embroidery as a salonist, but she was also thoroughly job. She'd once walked Hamilton out of Lisbon and into a public carriage with an armed driver, keeping up a stream of chatter that had kept him awake despite the sucking wound in his chest. He'd wanted to send her flowers afterward, but he couldn't find anything in the *Language of Blooms* volume provided by his regiment that both described how he felt and kept the precious distance of the connection between them.

"Extract," he said.

"Right. Looking."

She was silent for a moment that bore hard on Hamilton's nerves. Whoever was seeking them was now fumbling around like amateurs in front of that door. Perhaps that was why they'd botched the explosives. Hamilton feared amateurs most of all. Amateurs killed you against orders.

"You're in an infested rat-hole, Major. You should see what's rolling out on my coffee table. Decades of boltholes and overfolding, hidden and forgotten weapons. None near you, worse luck. If a point time-stop opens there and collapses Copenhagen—"

"If we punch out here, will it?"

"Possibly. Never was my favorite city. Preparing."

Something went bump against the door. Then started to push at it. Lustre stepped carefully back from where the bullets would come, and Hamilton realized that, thanks to the length of the comms cord, he had no option but to stand in their way.

He thought of moments with Annie, giving his mind nothing else to do.

The thumping on the door was concerted now. Deliberate.

"Ready," said Cushion.

Hamilton beckoned and then grabbed Lustre to him.

"And in my ear . . . Colonel Turpin sends his compliments."

"I return the Colonel's compliments," said Hamilton. "Go."

The hole opened under them with a blaze that might be the city collapsing. Hamilton and Lustre fell into it and down the flashing corridor at the speed of a hurricane. Bullets burst from the splintering door in the distance and tore down the silver butterfly tunnel around them, ricocheting ridiculously past them—

Hamilton wished he had something to shoot back into their bastard faces.

And then they were out, into the blessed air of the night, thrown to the ground by an impossible hole above them—

—that immediately and diplomatically vanished.

Hamilton leapt to his feet, looking round. They were in a side street. Freezing. Darkness. No witnesses. Cushion had managed even that. That was all she was going to be able to do tonight, for him or for any of his brothers and sisters anywhere in the Solar System. Turpin had allowed that for him. No, he checked himself, for what was inside Lustre.

He helped Lustre up, and they stared at the end of the street, where passers-by were running to and fro. He could hear the bells of Saint Mary's tolling ten o'clock. In the distance, the embassy was ablaze, and carriages with red lights and bells were flashing through the sky, into the smoke, starting to pump water from their ocean folds into it. Those might well come under fire. And they were the only branch of public life here that was almost certainly innocent of what had just happened. The smell of smoke washed down the street. It would be enough to make Frederik close the airways too. Turpin and Her Majesty the Queen Mother were being asked, in

this moment, to consider whether or not the knowledge Lustre had was worth open warfare between Greater Britain and a Dansk court who might well know nothing of all this, who already *knew* those secrets. But rather than let a British carriage in to collect the two of them, they'd spend hours asserting that their own services, riddled with rot as they might be, could handle it.

Across the street was a little inn with grown beef hanging from the roofline, pols music coming from the windows. The crowds would be heading to see the blaze and offer help in the useless way that gentlemen and those who wished to be gentlemen did.

Hamilton grabbed Lustre's hand and ran for the door.

He ordered in Dutch he called up from some regional variation in the back of his head some of the real beef, potatoes, and a bottle of wine, which he had no intention of drinking, but which served as an excuse as to why they wanted a discreet booth to themselves. Lustre looked demure at the landlord, avoiding his glance, a maid led astray. A maid, it suddenly occurred to Hamilton, in clothes that would raise eyebrows in London, being fifteen years out of the fashion. But they had no choice. And besides, this was Denmark.

They vanished into the darkness of their snug. They had a few minutes before the food arrived. They both started talking at once, quietly, so that the landlord wouldn't hear the strange tongue.

She held up a hand and he was silent.

"I'll tell you the whole bit," she said. "Fast as I can. Have you heard of the three quarters of an ounce theory?"

Hamilton shook his head.

"It's folk science, *Golden Book* stuff, the kind of infra-religious thing you hear in servant pools. This chap weighed all these dying people, and found, they say, that three quarters of an ounce leaves you at death. That being the weight of the soul."

"Is this really the time for dollymop theology?"

She didn't rise to it. "Now I'm going to tell you something secret, For Their Majesties secret—"

"No—!"

"And if I die and not you, what happens then?" she snapped. "Because just killing me will *not* save the balance!" She'd added an epithet to the word, shocking him at the sound of it in her mouth. "Oh yes, I want to make sure you know that, in case push comes to shove." She didn't give him time to formulate a reply and that was probably a blessing. "What kind of out of uniform man have you become, if you can't live with secrets?! I don't care what you're cleared for, it's just *us* at the moment!"

Hamilton finally nodded.

"All right, then. You probably haven't heard either, your reading still presumably not extending beyond the hunting pages, about the astronomical problems concerning galaxies, the distribution of mass therein?"

"What?! What is this—?"

"No, of course you haven't. What it comes down to is: galaxies seem to have more mass than they should, loads of it. Nobody knew what it was. It's not visible. By just plotting what it influences, astronomers have made maps of where it all is. For a few years that was the entire business of Herstmonceux. Which I thought odd when I read about it, but now I know why."

The dinner came and they were forced to silence for a moment, just looking at each other. This new determination suited her, Hamilton found himself thinking. As did the harsh language. He felt an old, obscure pain and killed it. The landlord departed with a look of voyeuristic pleasure. "Go on."

"Don't you see? If the three quarter ounce theory is true, there's weight in the world

that comes and goes, as if in and out of a fold, up God's sleeve as it were. Put loads of that together—"

Hamilton understood, and the distant enormity of it made him close his eyes. "That's the extra mass in those galaxies."

"And we have a map of it—"

"Which shows where there are minds, actual foreigners from other worlds, out there—!"

"*And perhaps nearby.*"

Hamilton's mind reeled at the horror of it. The potential threat to the balance! Any of the great powers—damn it—any *nation*, could gain immeasurable advantage over its fellows by trading intelligence with foreigners. "And this is what's in your head. The greatest secret of the great powers. But this is old news—they must have found a way to deal with it—"

"Yes. Because, after all, any of them could put together enough telescope time to work it out. As near as I can figure out, they shared the info. Every great court knows it at the highest level, so the balance is intact. Just about. I suppose they must have all made a secret agreement not to try to contact these foreigners. Pretty easy to check up on that, given how they all watch each other's embroidery."

Hamilton relaxed. So these were indeed old terrors, already dealt with by wiser heads. "And of course communication is all we're talking about. The distances involved—"

She looked at him like he was an erring child.

"Has one of the powers *broken* the agreement?!"

She pursed her lips. "This isn't the work of the great powers."

Hamilton wasn't sure he could take much more of this. "Then who?"

"Have you heard of the heavenly twins?"

"The Ransoms?!"

"Yes, Castor and Pollux."

Hamilton's mind was racing. The twins were arms dealers, who sold, it had been revealed a few years ago, to the shock of the great powers, not just to the nation to which they owed allegiance (which, them being from the northern part of the Columbian colonies, would be Britain or France), or even to one they'd later adopted, but to anyone. Once the great powers had found that out and closed ranks, dealing with the twins as they dealt with any threat to the balance, their representatives had vanished overnight from their offices in the world's capitals, and started to sell away from any counter, to rebels, mercenaries, colonies. Whoring out their services. The twins themselves had never shown their faces in public. It was said they had accumulated enough wealth to actually begin to develop new weapons of their own. Every other month some new speculation arose that one of the powers was secretly once more buying from them. Not something Britain would ever do, of course, but the Dutch, the Spaniards? "How are they involved?"

"When I was halfway across this city, on my original mission, a rabbit hole similar to the one we just fell down opened up under me and my honor guard."

"They can do that?!"

"Compared to what else they're doing, that's nothing. They had their own soldiers on hand, soldiers in *uniform*—"

Hamilton could hear the disgust in her voice, and matched it with his own. Tonight was starting to feel like some sort of nightmare, with every certainty collapsing. He felt like he was falling from moment to moment as terrible new possibilities sprang up before his eyes.

"They cut down my party, taking a few losses themselves. They took the bodies with them."

"They must have mopped the place up afterward, too."

"I was dragged before them. I don't know if we were still in this city. I was ready to say the words and cut myself off, but they were ready for that. They injected me with some sort of instant glossolalia. I thought for a second that I'd done it myself, but then I realized that I couldn't stop talking, that I was saying all sorts of nonsense, from anywhere in my mind, ridiculous stuff, shameful stuff." She paused for breath. "You were mentioned."

"I wasn't going to ask."

"I didn't talk about what I was carrying. Sheer luck. I wrenched clear of their thugs and tried to bash my brains out against the wall."

He had put his hand on hers. Without even thinking about it.

She let it stay. "I wouldn't recommend it, probably not possible, but they only gave me two cracks at it before they grabbed me again. They were planning to keep injecting me with the stuff until I'd spilled the words that'd let them use an observer to see the map. They locked me up in a room and recorded me all night. That got quite dull quite swiftly."

Listening to her, Hamilton felt himself calm. He was looking forward, with honest glee, to the possibility that he might be soon in a position to harm some of these men.

"I gambled that after it got late enough and I still hadn't said anything *politically* interesting they'd stop watching and just record it. I waited as long as I could with my sanity intact, then had at one of the walls. I found main power and shoved my fingers in. Wish I could tell you more about that, but I don't remember anything from then on until I woke up in what turned out to be a truly enormous void carriage. I came to in the infirmary, connected to all sorts of drugs. My internal clock said it was . . . four years later . . . which I took to be an error. I checked the package in my head, but the seals were all intact. I could smell smoke. So I took the drug lines out best I could, hopped out of bed. There were a few others in there, but they were all dead or out of it. Odd looking wounds, like their flesh had been sucked off them. I found more dead bodies in the corridor outside. Staff in that uniform of theirs. There was still somebody driving the thing, because when I checked the internal embroidery, there were three seats taken. I think they were running the absolute minimum staff, just trying to get the thing home, three survivors of whatever had happened. The carriage was throwing up all sorts of false flags and passport deals as we approached Earth orbit from high up above the plane. I went and hid near the bulwark door, and when the carriage arrived at one of the Danish high stations I waited until the rescue party dashed on. Then I wandered out." Her voice took on a pleading edge, as if she was asking if she was still in a dream. "I . . . took a descent bus and I remember thinking what classy transportation it was, very bells and whistles, especially for the Danes. When I listened in to the embroidery, and checked the log against what I was hearing, I realized . . . and it took some realizing, I can tell you, it took me checking many times . . ."

Her hand had grasped his, demanding belief.

"It had been four years unconscious for me . . . but . . ." She had to take a deep breath, her eyes appealing once again at the astonishing unfairness of it.

"Fifteen years for us," he said. Looking at her now, at how this older woman who had started to teach him about himself had stayed a girl of an age he could never now be seen with in public . . . the change had been lessened for him because it was how he'd kept her in his memory, but now he saw the size of it. The difference present between them was an index of all he'd done. He shook his head to clear it, to take those dismayed eyes off him. "What does it mean?"

She was about to answer him. But he suddenly realized the music had got louder. He knocked his steak knife from the table to the seat and into his pocket.

Lustre looked shocked at him.

But now a man looking like a typical patron of an inn had looked in at their booth. "Excuse me," he said, in Dutch with an accent Hamilton's eye notes couldn't place, "do you know where the landlord's gone? I'm meant to have a reservation—"

A little something about the man's expression.

He was getting away with it.

He wasn't.

Hamilton jerked sidelong rather than stand up, sending the knife up into the man's groin. He twisted it out as he grabbed for the belt, throwing him forward as blood burst over the tablecloth and he was up and out into the main bar just as the man started screaming—

There was another man, who'd been looking into the kitchen, suddenly angry at a landlord who, expecting the *usual* sort of trouble, had turned up the piped band. He turned now, his hand slapping for a gun at his waist—

*Amateurs!*

Hamilton threw the bloody knife at his face. In that moment, the man took it to be a throwing knife, and threw up a hand as it glanced off him, but Hamilton had closed the gap between the two of them, and now he swung his shoulder and slammed his fist into the man's neck. The man gurgled and fell, Hamilton grabbed him before he did and beat his hands to the gun.

He didn't use it. The man was desperately clutching at his own throat. Hamilton let him fall.

He swung back to the booth, and saw the other twitching body slide to the floor. Lustre was already squatting to gather that gun too.

He turned to the landlord coming out of the kitchen and pointed the gun at him. "More?!"

"No! I'll do anything—!"

"I mean, are there more of *them*?!"

"I don't know!" He was telling the truth.

Professionals would have kept everything normal and set up a pheasant shoot when Hamilton had answered a call of nature. So, amateurs, so possibly many of them, possibly searching many inns, possibly not guarding the exits to this one.

It was their only hope.

"All right." He nodded to Lustre. "We're leaving."

He got the landlord to make a noise at the back door, to throw around pots and pans, to slam himself against a cupboard. Gunfire might cut him down at any moment, and he knew it, but damn one Dane in the face of all this.

Hamilton sent Lustre to stand near the front door, then took his gun off covering the landlord and ran at it.

He burst out into the narrow street, into the freezing air, seeking a target—

He fired at the light that was suddenly in his eyes.

But then they were on him. Many of them. He hurt some of them. Possibly fatally. He didn't get off a shot.

He heard no shots from Lustre.

They forced something into his face and at last he had to take a breath of darkness.

Hamilton woke with a start. And the knowledge that he was a fool and a traitor because he was a fool. He wanted to bask in that misery, that he'd failed everyone he cared about. He wanted to lose to it, to let it halt his hopeless trying in favor of certainty.

He must not.

He sought his clock, and found that it was a few hours, not years, later. He'd kept his eyes closed because of the lights. But the light coming at him from all around was diffuse, comfortable.

Whatever situation he found himself in, his options were going to be limited. If there was no escape, if they were indeed in the hands of the enemy, his job now was to kill Lustre and then himself.

He considered that for a moment and was calm about it.

He allowed himself to open his eyes.

He was in what looked like the best room at an inn. Sunlike light shone through what looked like a projection rather than a window. He was dressed in the clothes he'd been wearing on the street. A few serious bruises. He was lying on the bed. He was alone. Nobody had bothered to tuck him in.

The door opened. Hamilton sat up.

It was a waiter, pulling a service trolley into the room. He saw that Hamilton was awake and nodded to him.

Hamilton inclined his head in return.

The waiter took the cover off the trolley, revealing dinner: what looked like real steak and eggs. He placed cutlery appropriately, bowed, and left once more. There was no sound of the door being locked.

Hamilton went to the trolley and looked at the cutlery. He ran his finger on the sharp, serrated edge of the steak knife. There was a message.

He sat down on the bed and ate.

He couldn't help the thoughts that swept through him. He felt them rather than discerned them as memories or ideas. He was made from them, after all. They all were, those who kept the balance, those who made sure that the great powers shared the Solar System carefully between them, and didn't spin off wildly into a war that everyone knew would be the last. That end of the world would free them all from responsibility, and join them with the kingdom that existed around the universe and inside every minuscule Newton Length. The balance, having collapsed, would crest as a wave again, finally, and stay there, finally including all who had lived, brought entirely into God. That much rough physics Keble had drummed into him. He'd never found himself wanting the final collapse. It was not to be wished for by mortals, after all. It was the shape of the very existence around them, not something they could choose the moment of. He enjoyed his duty, even enjoyed suffering for it, in a way. That was *meaning*. But concussions like this, explosions against the sides of what he understood, and so many of them, so quickly . . . No, he wouldn't become fascinated with the way the world around him seemed to be shaking on its foundations. This was just a new aspect to the balance, a new threat to it. It had many manifestations, many configurations. That was a line from some hymn he barely remembered. He would be who he was and do what had to be done.

That thought he heard as words, as the part of himself that had motive and will. He smiled at this restoration of strength and finished his steak.

The moment he'd finished eating, someone came for him.

This one was dressed in the uniform that Lustre had mentioned. Hamilton contained his reaction to it. To his eyes, it looked halfway to something from a carnival. Bright colors that nevertheless had never seen a battlefield, with no history to be read therein. The man wearing it looked like he'd been trained in a real army; he walked, Hamilton behind him, like he'd known a parade ground. A former officer, even. One who'd bought himself out or deserted. He ignored Hamilton's



attempts to start a conversation. Not questions, because he was already preparing himself for the forthcoming interrogation, and pointless questions were a hole in the dam. Instead Hamilton spoke only about the weather, and received just a wry look in return. A wry look from this bastard who'd sold his comrades for a bright coat.

Hamilton gave him a smile, and imagined what he'd do to him, given the chance. He'd left the knife beside his plate.

The corridors were bright and smooth, made of space, cast with colors and textures for the comfort of those who lived here. Hamilton followed the man to the door of what looked like an office and waited as he knocked on it and was called to enter. The door slid open on its own, as if servants were in short supply.

The chamber they stepped into was enormous. It was a dome, with a projected ceiling, on which could be seen . . .

Above them was a world. For a moment, Hamilton thought it must be Jupiter, on its night side. But no. He reeled again, without letting his face show it. This was a world he hadn't seen before. Which was impossible. But the notes in his eyes told him the projection was hallmarked as real space, not as an imagined piece of art. The sphere was dark and enormous. Its inky clouds glowed dully like the coals of hell.

"Hey," said a voice from across the room, in a breezy North Columbian accent, "good evening, Major Hamilton. Delighted you could join us."

Hamilton tore his gaze away from the thing above them.

Across the chamber were standing two men, one to each side of an enormous fireplace, above which was carved, and Hamilton was sure it had actually been carved, a coat of arms. Normally, the out of uniform man would have recoiled, but he was now in a world of shock, and this latest effrontery couldn't add to it. The arms weren't anything the International Brotherhood of Heralds would have approved of, but something . . . *personal* . . . the sort of thing a schoolboy would doodle in his rough book and then crumple before his peers saw it. Arms of one's own! The sheer presumption.

The two men were smiling at him, and if he hadn't been before, now Hamilton was ready to hate them. They were smiling as if the coat of arms and the unknown world they claimed was real were a joke. Like their pantomime guards were to Hamilton, though he wondered if these two saw *them* like that.

"Am I addressing the two . . . Mr. Ransoms?" He looked between them. And found a mystery had been repeated.

The men were both tall, nearly seven footers. They both had thinning hair, the furrowed brows of an academic, and had decided to wear glasses. More ostentation. They were dressed not like gentlemen, but in the sort of thing one of the husbands who came home to those little boxes in Kent might have worn for an evening at the golf club. They were similar in build, but . . .

One had at least a decade on the other.

And yet—

"These are Castor and Pollux Ransom, yes," said Lustre, from where she stood on the other side of the room. She had a glass of brandy in her hands, which were shaking. "The twins."

Hamilton looked between them. Everything about them was indeed exactly the same, apart from their ages. This must have the same cause as Lustre's situation, but what?

The younger man, Pollux, if Hamilton recalled correctly, separated himself from the fireplace and came to regard him with that same mocking gaze. "I assume that was Enochian for the obvious answer. It's true, Major. We were born, in a place that



had the Iroquois name of 'Toronto,' but which people like *you* call Fort York, on the same day in 1958."

Hamilton raised an eyebrow. "What's the difference, then? Clean living?"

"Far from it," laughed the older twin. "In either case."

"I guess you'd like some answers," said Pollux. "I'll do my best. You certainly left chaos in your wake. At 9:59 PM, the Court of Saint James's officially declared Denmark a 'protectorate of His Majesty,' and dispatched forces 'in support of King Fredrik,' whom they allege—"

"They declare," corrected Hamilton.

Pollux laughed. "Oh, let's get the manners right, and never mind the horrors they describe! All right. They *declare* that the mad old bastard has been the victim of some sort of coup, and intend to return him to his throne. A coup very much in the eye of the beholder, I should think. A lie more than a declaration, I'd call it. I wonder if Frederik will survive it?"

Hamilton gave no reply. He was pleased to hear it. But it only underlined how important the contents of Lustre's head were.

Pollux continued his explanations with a gesture around him. "We're in a mansion, a perfectly normal one, in lunar orbit." He gestured upward. "That's an intelligent projection from another of our properties, one considerably beyond the political boundaries of the Solar System. We've named that object 'Nemesis.' Because *we* discovered it. It's the sun's twin, much less bright." He shared a smile with Castor. "No metaphor intended." He looked back to Hamilton. "Traveling at the speed of light, it'd take around a year to get there."

"You speak of a property there—" Hamilton wondered if they'd sent some automatic carriage out to the place and were calling it by a lofty name.

"We've got several properties there," said Castor, stepping forward to join his brother. "But I think Pollux was referring to the star itself."

Hamilton knew they were goading him. So he gave them nothing.

"Do you remember the story of Newton and the worm, Major?" asked Pollux, as if they were all sharing the big joke together. But the man wasn't attempting courtesy, his tone of voice scathing, as if addressing a wayward child. "It's part of the balance nursery curriculum in Britain, right? You know, old Isaac's in his garden, an apple falls on his head, he picks it up and sees this tiny worm crawling across its surface, and so he starts thinking about the very small. *Unaligned* historians have sunk almost every detail of that old tale, by the way, but never mind that. Isaac realized that space needs an observer, God, to make reality keep happening when there's none of us around. You know, he's the guy in the forest when the tree falls, and because of him it makes a noise. He's part of the fabric of creation, part of and the motive behind the 'decreed and holy' balance. And the stars and the galaxies and the tremendous distances between them are like they are just because that's how he set up the stage, and that's all there is to it. The balance in our Solar System is the diamond at the center of an ornate setting, the further universe. But it is just a setting. Or at least that's the attitude that the great powers' academia has always encouraged. It keeps everything fixed. Held down."

"But you know, we're not much for academia, we like to get our hands dirty," said Castor, who sounded a little more affable. "The two of us have our feet planted in the muddy battlefields of Mother Earth, where we've made our money, but we've always looked at the stars. Part of our fortune has gone toward the very expensive hobby of first class astronomy. We have telescopes better than any the great powers can boast, placed at various locations around the Solar System. We also make engines. A carriage that slides down a fold, altering gravity under itself at every moment, is capable, in the void, of only a certain acceleration. The record keeps

inching up, but it's a matter of gaining a few miles an hour because of some technical adjustment. And once you've reached any great acceleration inside the Solar System, you're going to need to start decelerating in a few days, because you'll need to slow down at your destination. It wouldn't be out of the question to send an automatic carriage out into the wilds beyond the comet cloud, but somehow nobody's gotten around to doing it."

"That always puzzled us."

"Until we heard whispers about the great secret. Because people talk to us, we sell weapons and buy information. It became clear that for a nation to send such a carriage, to even prepare a vehicle that greatly exceeded records, would be to have every other nation suspect they'd found something out there, and become suddenly aggressive toward them, in a desperate attempt to keep the balance."

Hamilton kept his silence.

"When we stumbled on Nemesis in a photographic survey, we realized that we had found something we had always sought, along with so many other disenfranchised inhabitants of Earth—"

"Land," said Hamilton.

They laughed and applauded like this was a party game. "Exactly," said Castor.

"We tossed a coin," said Pollux, "I was the one who went. With a small staff. I took a carriage with a fold full of supplies, and set it accelerating, using an engine of our own, one limited by *physical* rather than *political* principles. I struck out for a new world. I opened up a new frontier. For *us*, this time. For all the people shut out when the great powers closed down the world—" He noticed that his brother was frowning at him, and visibly reined himself in. "The carriage accelerated until after a year or so we were approaching the speed of light. We discovered, to our shock, that as we did so, the demands on the fold became extraordinary. It seems, incredibly, that there is a speed limit on the universe!"

Hamilton tried to keep his expression even, but knew he was failing. He didn't know how much of this he could believe.

"By my own internal clock, the round trip took four years—"

"But I remained here as fifteen years passed," said Castor. "Because when you approach the speed of light, time slows down. Just for you. Yeah, I know how mad it sounds! It's like God starts looking at you *differently!*"

"And you should see the beauty of it, Major, the rainbows and the darkness and the feeling that one is . . . finally close to the center of understanding."

Hamilton licked his dry lips. "Why does all this happen?"

"We don't know, exactly," admitted Castor. "We've approached this as engineers, not theorists. 'God does not flay space,' that's what Newton is supposed to have said. He theorized that God provides a frame of reference for all things, relative to Him. But these spooky changes in mass and time depending on speed . . . that seems to say there's a bit more going on than Newton's minuscule gravitation and minuscule causality!"

Hamilton nodded in the direction of Lustre. "I gather she wasn't on that first trip?"

"No," said Pollux. "That's what I'm coming to. When the carriage started decelerating toward Nemesis, we began to see signs of what we initially took to be a Solar System surrounding the star. Only as we got closer did we realize that what we had taken to be small worlds were actually carriages. Ones the size of which human beings have not dreamt. The carriages of foreigners."

Hamilton's mouth set in a line. That these had been the first representatives of humanity! And the foreigners were so close! If any of this could be true. He didn't let his gaze move upward as if to see them. He could almost feel the balance judging. It was as if something dear to him was sliding swiftly away, into the void,

and only destruction could follow. "So," he said, "you drew alongside and shook hands."

"No," laughed Pollux. "Unfortunately. We could see immediately that there were enormous symbols on the carriages, all the same design, though we couldn't make anything of them. They were kind of . . . like red birds, but deformed, unfocused. You needed to see two to realize they were a symbol at all. We approached with all hul-loos and flags, and suddenly our embroidery was flooded with what might have been voices, but sounded like low booming sounds. We yelled back and forth, uselessly, for about an hour. We were preparing a diagram to throw into the void in a canister, stick figures handing each other things—"

"I'll bet," said Hamilton.

"—when they switched on lights that just illuminated their insignia. Off, then again. Over and over. It was like they were demanding for us to show ours."

Hamilton pointed at the monstrosity over the fireplace. "Didn't you have that handy?"

"That's a later invention," said Castor, "in response to this very problem."

"When we didn't have any insignia of our own to display," said Pollux, "they started firing at us. Or we assume it was firing. I decided to get out of it, and we resumed acceleration, rounded the star, and headed home."

Hamilton couldn't conceal a smile.

"Before the next expedition," continued Castor, "we built the biggest carriage we could and had the coats of arms painted all over it. But we needed one more thing: something to barter with." He gestured toward Lustre. "The contents of her head, the locations of the missing mass, the weight of all those living minds, a trading map of the heavens. Depending on where the foreigners came from, we might have information they didn't. Or at least we could demonstrate we were in the game. And if one group of foreigners didn't like us, we could go find another."

"But she proved to be made of strong stuff," said Hamilton.

"After she'd tried to shock herself into either death or deadlock, we kept her on ice," said Castor. "We sent her with the staff on the main carriage, in the hope they could find a way to breach her along the way, or maybe offer her to the foreigners as sealed goods." Hamilton was certain the twin was enjoying trying Lustre's modesty with his words. "But their response this time was, if anything, more aggressive. Our people left a number of orbiting automatics, and a number of houses ready for occupation, but barely escaped with their lives."

"It seems they don't like you any more than we do," said Hamilton. "I can understand why you'd want her back. But why am I still alive?"

The twins looked at each other like they'd come to an unpleasant duty sooner than they would have liked. Castor nodded to the air, the doors opened by themselves, and a number of the pantomime guards strode into the room.

Hamilton controlled his breathing.

"Chain him to the fireplace," said Pollux.

They pulled the shackles from the same folds where Hamilton had been certain they'd kept weapons trained on him. His kind retired, if they did, to simple places, and didn't take kindly to parties in great houses. A room was never a room when you'd worked out of uniform.

They fixed his wrists and ankles to the fireplace, and stripped him. Hamilton wanted to tell Lustre to look away, but he was also determined to not ask for anything he couldn't have. He was going to have to die now, and take a long time about it. "You know your duty," he said.

She looked horribly uncertain back at him.

Pollux nodded again, and a control pedal appeared out of the floor, light flooding with it. He placed his foot on it. "Let's get the formalities out of the way," he said. "We'd give you a staggering amount of money, in carbon, for your cooperation."

Hamilton swore lightly at him.

"And *that's* the problem with the world. All right, I tried. What I'm going to do now is to open a very small fold in front of your genitals. I'll then increase the gravity, until Miss Saint Clair elects to stop using Enochian and says the words that will allow us to observe the package in her mind. Should she cut herself off from the world with her own language, I'll start by pulling off your genitalia, and then move on to various other parts of your body, using folds to staunch the blood flow, killing you slowly while she's forced to watch. Then I'll do the same to her." He looked quickly to Lustre, and for a moment it looked to Hamilton like he was even afraid. "Don't make me do this."

Lustre stood straight and didn't answer.

"Say what you have to say to cut yourself off," said Hamilton. "Say it now."

But, to his fury and horror, she maintained the same expression, and just looked quickly between them.

"For God's sake—!" he cried out.

Pollux pressed gently with his foot, and Hamilton tensed at the feel of the fold grabbing his body. It made him recall, horribly, moments with Lustre, and, even worse, moments with Annie. He didn't want that association, so he killed it in his mind. There could be no thoughts of her as he died. It would be like dragging a part of her through this with him. There was no pain, not yet. He reserved his shouts for when there would be. He would use his training, go cursing them, as loud as he could, thus controlling the only thing he could. He was proud to have the chance to manage his death and die for king, country, and balance.

Pollux looked again at Lustre, then pressed slightly more. Now there was pain. Hamilton drew in a breath to begin telling this classless bastard what he thought of him—

—when suddenly there came a sound.

Something had crunched against something, far away.

The twins both looked suddenly in the same direction, startled.

Hamilton let out a choked laugh. Whatever this was—

And that had been an explosion!

A projection of a uniformed man flew up onto the wall. "Somehow there are three carriages—!"

"The church bells!" said Hamilton, realizing.

Castor ran for the door, joining a great outflowing of guards as they grabbed arms from the walls, but Pollux stayed where he was, a dangerous expression on his face, his foot poised on the pedal. One guard had stayed beside Lustre also, his rifle covering her. "What?!"

"The bells of Saint Mary's in Copenhagen. Ten o'clock." He was panting at the pain and the pressure. "You said the city became a British possession at 9:59. While we were falling." He swore at the man who was about to maim him, triumphant. "They must have put a fold in me with a tracker inside, as we fell! Didn't harm the balance if we landed in Britain!"

Pollux snarled and slammed his foot down on the pedal.

Hamilton didn't see what happened in the next few seconds. His vision distorted with the pain, which reached up into his jaw and to the roots of his teeth.

But the next thing he knew, Lustre had slammed a palm against the wall, and his shackles had disappeared. There was a shout of astonishment. The pressure cut off and the pain receded. He was aware of a guard somewhere over there in a pool of

blood. Reflexively, he grabbed the rifle Lustre held. She tried to hold onto it, as if uncertain he could use it better than she could. They each scrabbled at it, they only had seconds—!

He was aware of regimental cries converging on the room, bursting through the doors.

He saw, as if down a tunnel, that Pollux was desperately stamping at the pedal, and light had suddenly blazed across his foot again.

Pollux raised his foot, about to slam it down, to use the fold in the center of the room, opened to its fullest extent, to rip apart Hamilton and everyone else.

Hamilton shoved Lustre aside and in one motion fired.

The top of Pollux's head vanished. His foot spasmed downward.

It seemed to be moving slowly, to Hamilton's pain-dulled eyes.

The sole of the man's shoe connected with the control.

For a moment it looked like it had done so with enough force that Pollux Ransom would not die alone.

But it must have landed too softly. By some minuscule amount.

The corpse fell aside. Its tormented soul had, a moment before, vanished from the universe.

"That'll be a weight off his mind," said Hamilton.

And then he passed out.

Six weeks later, following some forced healing and forced leave, Hamilton stood once again in front of Turpin. He had been called straight in, rather than returned to his regiment. He hadn't seen Lustre since the assault on the mansion. He'd been told that she had been interviewed at length and then returned to the bosom of the diplomatic corps. He assumed that she'd told Turpin's people everything, and that, thus, at the very least, he was out of a job. At the worst, he could find himself at the end of the traitor's noose, struggling in the air above Parliament Square.

He found he couldn't square himself to that. He was full of concerns and impertinent queries. The lack of official reaction so far had been trying his nerves.

But as Turpin had run down what had happened to the various individuals in the mansion, how Castor was now in the cells far beneath this building, and what the origins and fates of the toy soldiers had been, how various out of uniform officers were busy unraveling the threads of the twins' conceits, all over the world, Hamilton gradually began to hope. Surely the blow would have landed before now? King Frederik had been found, hiding or pretending to hide, and had been delighted, once the situation had been starkly explained to him, to have the British return him to his throne. Denmark remained a British protectorate while His Majesty's forces rooted out the last of the conspirators in the pay of the Ransoms. And, since a faction in that court had been found and encouraged that sought to intermarry and unify the kingdoms, perhaps this would remain the case for some considerable while.

"Of course," said Turpin, "they weren't really twins."

Hamilton allowed the surprise to show on his face. "Sir?"

"We've found family trees that suggest they're actually cousins, similar in appearance, with a decade or so between them. We've got carriages on the way to what we're going to call George's Star, and people examining that projection. We don't expect to find anything beyond a single automatic in orbit."

"So . . . the girl—" He took a chance on referring to her as if he didn't know her, hoping desperately that she'd kept the secret of what he hadn't reported, all those years ago.

"We kept an eye on her after the interviews. She told us she'd learned the access

codes for Ransom's embroidery from when she was on that enormous carriage she mentioned. Another thing we tellingly haven't found, by the way, along with any high performance carriages in the Ransom garages. But she hadn't quite got enough detail on the earliest years of Lustre Saint Clair's life. A brilliant cover, a brilliant grown flesh job, but not quite good enough. She faltered a little when we put it to her that, struggling over that gun with you, she was actually trying to save Pollux Ransom's life. We decided to let her out of the coop and see where she led us. As we expected, she realized we were on to her and vanished. Almost certainly into the Russian embassy. Certainly enough that we may find ourselves able to threaten the Czar with some embarrassment. You must have wondered yourself, considering the ease of your escape from the embassy, her reluctance to take the observer machine. . . ." He raised an eyebrow at Hamilton. "Didn't you?"

Hamilton felt dizzy, as if the walls of his world had once more vibrated under an impact. "What were they after?"

"Easy enough to imagine. The Russians would love to see us move forces out of the inner Solar System in order to secure an otherwise meaningless territory in the hope that these fictitious foreigners might return. And just in the week or so while we were interviewing her, you should have seen the havoc this story caused at court. The hawks who want to 'win the balance' were all for sending the fleet out there immediately. The doves were at their throats. The Queen Mother had to order everyone to stop discussing it. But fortunately, we soon had an answer for them, confirmed by what we got out of Castor. An elegant fable, wasn't it? The sort of thing Stichen would put together out of the White Court. I'll bet it was one of his. You know, the strange-looking wounds, red birds, booming sounds, fine fly detail like that. If we hadn't planted that tracker on you, the girl would have had to find some way to signal us herself. Or, less wasteful, you'd have been allowed to escape. Of course, the Ransoms' worldwide network isn't quite the size they made it out to be, not when you subtract all the rubles that are vanishing back to Moscow. But even so, clearing all that out makes the balance a bit safer tonight."

Hamilton didn't know what to say. He stood there on the grown polished wood timbers and looked down at the whorls within whorls. An odd thought struck him. A connection back to the last certainty he recalled feeling. When his world had been set on sturdier foundations. "Ambassador Bayoumi," he said. "Did he make it out?"

"I've no idea. Why do you ask?"

Hamilton found he had no reason in his head, just a great blankness that felt half merciful and half something lost. "I don't know," he said finally. "He seemed kind."

Turpin made a small grunt of a laugh, and looked back to his papers. Hamilton realized that he'd been dismissed. And that the burdens he'd brought with him into the room would not be ended by a noose or a pardon.

As he made his way to the door, Turpin seemed to realize that he hadn't been particularly polite. He looked up again. "I heard the record of what you said to him," he said. "You said nobody would care if she killed you. It's not true, you know."

Hamilton stopped, and tried to read the scarred and stitched face of the man.

"You're greatly valued, Jonathan," said Turpin. "If you weren't, you wouldn't still be here."

A year or so later, Hamilton was woken in the early hours by an urgent tug on the embroidery, a voice that seemed familiar, trying to tell him something, sobbing and yelling in the few seconds before it was cut off.

But he couldn't understand a word it said.

The next morning, there was no record of the exchange.

In the end, Hamilton decided that it must have been a dream. ○



### Gaughn But Not Forgotten

**T**he very first issue of any professional SF magazine I ever encountered—when I was that ideally impressionable age, twelve going on thirteen—was the July 1967 issue of *F&SF*.

That issue featured a cover by Jack Gaughan, for a Keith Laumer story. Nowadays you can of course instantly see Gaughan's painting online, thanks to the great website maintained by Phil Stephensen-Payne, at [http://www.philsp.com/data/images/f/fantasy\\_and\\_science\\_fiction\\_196707.jpg](http://www.philsp.com/data/images/f/fantasy_and_science_fiction_196707.jpg). The adolescent Paul loved the cover (not to mention the contents of that issue), and it crystallized my recognition of the artist and his unique little ideogram of a signature, interlocked initials. I realized I had, all unknowingly, already been admiring Jack Gaughan's work on a variety of paperbacks, and I resolved to watch for it thereafter. Finding more art by Gaughan was easy enough in that period, as he seemed to be everywhere, turning out fabulous stuff for prozines and book publishers alike. He became and remained one of my favorite illustrators. You might say he marked the dawn of my acknowledgment of the individuality of artists.

Leap forward about twenty years, to the mid-eighties. By chance, I became friends with Jack Gaughan's daughter, Norah, shortly after her father had passed away. I had never been lucky enough to meet Jack at a convention, and now, despite an even closer connection, it was too late. A sad fact, but I was grateful to have Norah Gaughan as a pal.

Jump ahead another twenty years, to the middle of our current decade. Luis Ortiz, publisher of NonStop Press and author of two seminal biographical/critical books on Lee Brown Coye and Ed Emshwiller, was casting about for his next artist subject, and he became inspired by a blog post of mine on Gaughan. Soon, I had put him in touch with Norah Gaugh-

an and her mother, Jack's widow, Phoebe.

You can purchase the splendid, essential outcome of that forty-five-year chain of influences and admiration: *Outermost: The Life & Art of Jack Gaughan* (NonStop, hardcover, \$39.95, 176 pages, ISBN 978-1-933065-16-8). Holding this book in my hands feels as if I'm having the meeting with Jack I never enjoyed.

Ortiz is a master at assembling rock-solid facts, elucidating informed critical appraisals, and welding the two streams of discourse into a very readable narrative with the allure of a novel. The text in *Outermost* limns a life, a scene, a profession with clarity, understanding, and empathy. Gaughan's mature character and talents, and the youthful sources thereof, are laid out with anatomical precision. Both his shortcomings and genius are dealt with frankly.

Yet certainly, as a modestly sized but aspiring coffee-table art book, the book must please the visual taste buds as well, and that the gorgeous tome does immensely well. Ortiz has perfectly balanced well-known Gaughan works with lesser known professional ones, then supplemented those treasures with tons of sketches and plenty of fannish work. (You'll see some of Gaughan's work for early issues of this very magazine, in fact!) The color reproduction on high-quality paper is savory as well. You will spend hours of pleasure on this feast.

At the end, what can be said of Gaughan's career and his accomplishments? His best work—and that was a huge amount and percentage—possessed joy, movement, wit, and zest. He never stopped experimenting and growing. He inhabited his era fully, yet emerged eternal. He became a bit too obsessive about commercial accounts, hooked on taking any and all assignments in order to make a living. But such is always the trap awaiting any freelancer. Despite overwork, he never gave less than all he had available at the



moment. His life and career remain exemplary, and live on in the hearts and minds of countless readers such as myself.

### The Life of Mr. Wheatblossom

Last year saw not just the handsome and welcome Gaughan biography, but also an even more impressive one, in terms of scholarship, reach and authority. I refer to Mark Rich's *C.M. Kornbluth: The Life and Work of a Science Fiction Visionary* (McFarland, trade paper, \$39.95, 451 pages, ISBN 978-0-7864-4393-2). You might have noted that over recent years fiction from Mr. Rich, a talented storyteller himself, has been sparse on the ground. No doubt unceasing diligent work on this volume explains why. I miss Mark's stories, but getting this massive, exhaustive and illuminating Kornbluth bio makes the sacrifice worth it, to a large degree!

Because homeboy Rich knows the SF community inside-out, you would expect that he would be primed to capture and recreate all the intimacy of our storied history, from fannish milieus to professional writing territory. And at this he does indeed succeed admirably. Reading this book is like being immersed in a vivid, impassioned, meticulously researched historical novel. It's Sam Moskowitz meets Harry Warner, Jr., but filtered through Anthony Powell and David Halberstam.

Rich exuberantly evokes the laughter and tears, rage and joy of the SF world and its motley inhabitants (and also that smaller, less consequential world known as mundania) over the span of Kornbluth's lifetime (1923-1958). This seminal period gave birth to so much of what we take for granted in the genre today, and to so many classic works. Rich gets it all down on the page. He understands market forces, historical trends, and all the million and one factors that determined the course of this slice of literary history.

But all of that is merely the supportive matrix surrounding the man at the center, Kornbluth (whose name could literally be translated as "wheat blossom"). CMK is

the whole reason for building this shrine, and Rich beautifully honors the man, not by sycophantic praise, but by honesty, accuracy, and critical insights. He builds a living portrait of Kornbluth in all his complexities, rewarding and infuriating. He charts Kornbluth's life on an almost daily basis, relying stringently on impeccable primary and secondary sources melded into a smoothly readable narrative. Here, for instance, is a description of Cyril and Mary Kornbluth's living quarters:

"They owned little in the way of furnishings, after the move halfway across the continent from Chicago. On the ground floor they had a large coffee table stained in dark mahogany. On the walls around it was their library, on improvised brick-and-plank shelving. For his office in the attic, Kornbluth set up a desk, chair, floor lamp, and standard typewriter. Mary's ceramic study went into the cellar."

This is more time-travel than mere scholarship!

Thanks to Rich's empathy and unrelenting accumulation of facts, we see Kornbluth grow, change, mature—and perish too soon. Along the way, Rich also delivers synopses of the major works, with deep assessments.

The ancillary and essential figures orbiting Kornbluth's star—many of them major personalities according to their own lights and also by consensus history—are developed with similar high-resolution profiles. Rich attempts to do justice to various friends and enemies, roadblockers and supporters (sometimes the same person filled both roles at different times!). He reports the facts, but is also unhesitant about drawing conclusions about behaviors and motives.

The arc of CMK's always troubled life—from teen prodigy through exuberant young manhood to exhausted and disappointed maturity and last-minute reawakening—might read as a tragedy, if given only journalistic coverage. But in the capable, molding hands of Mark Rich, Kornbluth's life emerges as perfect and right and satisfying, still as relevant

today as ever, even acknowledging the aborted fulfillment of his enormous talent and potential.

### Four Fabulous French Volumes Can't Go Wrong

This past September I had the pleasure of attending a convention in Germany with Brian Stableford, our first meeting in the flesh. I found him, as you might suspect from reading his many stories in these very pages, erudite, witty, and charming. At one point, a small party of dinnergoers began playing a game: "If you had a time machine, what single era would you most like to visit?" Brian's choice? Late-nineteenth-century Paris, for its unparalleled artistic and literary scene.

Well, lacking an actual time machine, M. Stableford has yet done all within his powers to mentally inhabit that milieu—and to share the results of his creative sympathies with us. He has been translating a wealth of French fantastika for some years now, bringing to light undiscovered treasures so important in charting the true global history of our literature. Most of these works have appeared from Jean-Marc Lofficier's splendid Black Coat Press, which specializes in such items. And now Stableford and Black Coat have outdone themselves with two new projects: six volumes of the work of J-H Rosny Aine (1856-1940), and five volumes from the oeuvre of Maurice Renard (1875-1939). Today, I'll consider four of the eleven volumes, as a sample of the wealth.

Curiously enough, Rosny Aine and Renard each boast a well-received piece of fiction that made their names known to English-speaking readers and moviegoers. For Rosny Aine, it was the tale that became the *Quest for Fire*. For Renard, it was *The Hands of Orlac*. And while I suppose being known as a one-hit wonder is better than experiencing total literary oblivion, such a fate does tend to diminish and obscure all of a writer's other stuff. Stableford is out to remedy that historical injustice, in an entertaining way.

The first volume in the Rosny Aine

set, *The Navigators of Space* (trade paper, \$29.95, 435 pages, ISBN 978-1-0935558-35-4) opens with a highly informative and riveting sixty-page essay by Stableford on Rosny Aine's life and significance and history of fiction production. This recreation of the late-nineteenth-century French literary milieu is fascinating in its own right. But then comes something even better, the fiction.

The first story, "The Xipehuz," has had some English distribution before, but here shines in Stableford's new translation. (It should be mentioned that at various points in this volume, BS generously shares his decision-making process with us, giving us insight into the rigors of translation.) Radiating something of a REH or HPL prehistoric vibe, it tells of how our ancestors managed to defeat an alien incursion, through the use of the scientific method. This privileging of intellectual acumen is a hallmark of Rosny Aine's work.

The second piece, "The Skeptical Legend," is a weird non-story resonating with both Stapledon and David Lindsay. "Another World" is the autobiography of a mutant fellow with lilac skin and opaque eyes, who can see into other dimensions and realms. "The Death of the Earth" is a truly poignant apocalypse, ending in unmitigated tragedy for humanity, yet hope for a successor creation. The title story is Rosny Aine's parallel-evolved version of Weinbaum's "A Martian Odyssey." And its sequel, "The Astronauts," introduces a female space explorer for a return visit to Mars.

As Stableford points out, Rosny Aine was always somewhat capricious and improvisatory as a writer. But this did nothing to detract from his suspenseful storytelling, nor fecundity of ideas. These stories rival anything from American SF's pre-Campbellian period, and it is in fact rather interesting to compare them with early work by, say, Jack Williamson and Edmond Hamilton. Despite deploying similar concepts, characters, and themes, the American stories exhibit both a greater innocence and a greater aspiration than those of Rosny Aine, who radiated more maturity and more European

weariness, realism, and surrealism. We are plainly seeing the roots of Stanislaw Lem here, rather than the roots of Isaac Asimov, say. Perhaps nowhere is this more apparent than in the weird sexual relations found in "The Navigators" and its companion piece. One of the humans falls in love with a Tripedal, six-eyed Martian, and eventually experiences a *ménage-à trois* with his human bride and the alien. *Vive la différence!*

Volume 3 of the set, *The Mysterious Force* (trade paper, \$24.95, 329 pages, ISBN 978-1-935558-37-8), contains a short story and two novels. The story and the first novel are brilliant, illustrating Rosny Aine's endearing eccentricities and crotchets even more deeply, while the second novel, *Hareton Ironcastle's Amazing Adventure*, is pedestrian and dull by comparison. Stableford calls it "uninspiring," and conjectures that it was dashed off quickly to order, cobbled together from unused story fragments. It's standard lost-world Haggard with a trace of ERB.

But "The Cataclysm" and the title novel are exceptional. Both concern strange plagues that overtake the planet and mankind. Here we see Rosny Aine's affinity to Ballard, of all people. His protagonists, while seeking to understand the catastrophes, are basically passive, and not a little enraptured by the disasters. Their odysseys are psychic as much as physical. Again, Rosny Aine's ability to conjure up surreal imagery is paramount, as he depicts, for instance, an invasion by "living patches" that colonize the human epidermis not as stable sores, but as moving colonies. And in *The Mysterious Force*, Rosny Aine shows how to double down on the fictional stakes. At the midpoint of the book, when phase one of the disaster is surmounted, you begin to suspect that the story has reached its natural, satisfying end. Then he initiates phase two, a ramping-up that is completely different yet logically consequential. That's the SF writer's seminal tactic, asking and dramatizing the next question beyond the obvious one.

If Rosny Aine was, to some degree,

analogous to A.E. van Vogt in his high-concept, somewhat ham-handed and dreamlike narratives, then his friend and contemporary Maurice Renard might be said to resemble Fritz Leiber or Damon Knight or the young Algis Budrys: a more sophisticated, intellectual, polished, and coolly cerebral writer. It is emblematic of Renard's different attitude and mind that he was moved, unlike Rosny Aine, to coin, in a 1909 manifesto (shades of Bruce Sterling!) a term for the kind of new fiction he was interested in: "scientific marvel fiction." If only history had gone differently, with Francophone SF gaining global eminence, the magazine in your hands might be known as *Asimov's Scientific Marvel Fiction*.

The debut volume in the Renard set contains another long introductory piece by Stableford. And although circumstances did not permit me to lay my hands on this item, I'm certain, based on Stableford's competence, that it ranks with his Rosny Aine essay for completeness, insight, and informativeness. The first volume actually to fall under my eyes is the second, *A Man Among the Microbes* (trade paper, \$22.95, 332 pages, ISBN 978-1-935558-16-3), which, like all these books, contains equally stimulating shorter intros to the individual stories, as well as a comprehensive Afterword.

The novel that lends its title to the whole book is a classic "incredible shrinking man" tale, penned long before Richard Matheson or even Henry Hasse. Our hero, taking some experimental pills to reduce his height to better consort with the female object of his affections (what a French premise!), shrinks down below molecular size and ends up in a subatomic Utopia, whose ornately imagined customs are used to comment on human quirks. Emulating Swift and Voltaire, Renard adds a scientific and logical patina and foundation to his tale that raises it to a rigorous level above its predecessors.

The short fiction that follows ranges from highly scientific to outright fantasy. But two exceptional tales deserve praise. "A Motionless Voyage" is rather Rudy

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Ruckerish, dealing as it does with the discovery of how to control inertia. And "The Singular Fate of Bouvancourt" is a neat early example of new dimensions opening up vistas of horror.

*The Blue Peril* (trade paper, \$24.95, 360 pages, ISBN 978-1-935558-17-0), the third entry in the set, is not an omnibus but a single big novel, from 1911. It postulates a form of dangerous, invisible, upper atmospheric life (the Blue Peril) and then narrates the smallish war between humanity and the aerial predators, who have taken to abducting human specimens.

For modern tastes, the novel is a bit slow to "get off the ground" (pardon the pun), but when it accelerates midway through, it really delivers. The anxiety of the relatives of the abductees, the global panic and media interest, the sensations

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of helplessness mingled with dauntless scientific curiosity—all these elements are arrayed brilliantly to form the template for so many genre tales that would follow. Renard is not averse to spicing up his narrative with some sensationalistic scenes, such as a rain of human offal consisting of the dissected bits of some kidnapped specimens. But his main impulse is to provoke a sense of wonder at the mysteries the cosmos contains, and man's ability to parse them. Readers today will see adumbrations of Charles Fort, Lovecraft, Eric Frank Russell, and Colin Wilson in these entertaining pages, which come to us only through the hard work and skills of Messrs. Stableford and Black Coat Press (which, by the way, has graced these volumes with some gorgeous cover art). To them, *merci beaucoup!* ○

# SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

Good Memorial Day weekend bets for Asimovians are BaltiCon (where I'll be), MarCon, Oasis, and MisCon. Also this month, consider the Nebula Awards weekend, ConCarolinas, SoonerCon, DuckCon, and ApolloCon. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on fanzines and clubs, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con five months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard. —Erwin S. Strauss

## MAY 2011

- 13-15—GayLaxiCon. For info, write: 2665 Meadow Ct., Chamblee GA 30341. Or phone: (973) 242-5999 (10 am to 10 pm, not collect). (Web) [outlantacon.org](http://outlantacon.org). (E-mail) [info@outlantacon.org](mailto:info@outlantacon.org). Con will be held in: Atlanta GA (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Holiday Inn Select Perimeter. Guests will include: Eugie Foster, Melissa Carter. For GLBT fans and their friends.
- 19-22—Nebula Awards Weekend. [nebulaawards.com](http://nebulaawards.com). Hilton, Washington DC. SF/fantasy Writers of America annual awards meeting.
- 20-22—Steampunk World's Fair. [steampunkworldsfair.com](http://steampunkworldsfair.com). Somerset NJ (near NYC). Jake von Slatt, Prof. Elemental, Walter Sickert.
- 21—Book Festival. (301) 258-6350. [gaithersburgbookfestival.org](http://gaithersburgbookfestival.org). Gaithersburg MD. Books of all kinds.
- 23-26—Book Expo America. [bookexpoamerica.com](http://bookexpoamerica.com). Javits Center, New York NY. The year's big publishing industry trade show.
- 26-29—Anime Oasis. [animeoasis.org](http://animeoasis.org). Boise ID. Sonny Strail, Michael Coleman. No connection with Oasis in Florida.
- 26-30—WisCon, Box 1624, Madison WI 53701. (608) 233-8850. [wiscon.info](http://wiscon.info). Concourse Hotel. Nisi Shawl. Feminism and SF.
- 27-29—MarCon, Box 141414, Columbus OH 43214. [marcon.org](http://marcon.org). Hyatt. F. Paul Wilson, J. Palencar, H. Turtledove, E. Flint, L. Fish.
- 27-29—Oasis, c/o Box 323, Goldenrod FL 32733. [oasfils.org](http://oasfils.org). Sheraton Downtown, Orlando FL. D. Drake, T. Castillo, C. Ulbrich.
- 27-29—Timegate, Box 500565, Atlanta GA 31150. [timegate.org](http://timegate.org). Holiday Inn Select Perimeter. Dr. Who, Stargate, general SF media.
- 27-30—BaltiCon, Box 686, Baltimore MD 21203. (410) 563-2737. Marriott, Hunt Valley MD. Bova, DiFate, Bacigalupi, Geppi, the Suttons.
- 27-30—MisCon, Box 7721, Missoula MT 59807. (406) 544-7083. [miscon.org](http://miscon.org). Ruby's Inn. Carol Berg, Kass McCann, Tiffany Toland.
- 27-30—MediaWest\*Con, 200 E. Thomas, Lansing MI 48906. [mediawestcon@aol.com](mailto:mediawestcon@aol.com). Causeway Bay Hotel. Old-school SF media con.

## JUNE 2011

- 3-5—ConCarolinas, Box 26336, Charlotte NC 28221. [concarolinas.org](http://concarolinas.org). Hilton University Place. D. Lawrence, Turtledove, B. Stevens.
- 3-5—SoonerCon, 1848 Hemmingway Dr., Edmond OK 73013. (405) 310-9255. [soonercon.com](http://soonercon.com). Biltmore, Oklahoma City OK. T. Powers.
- 10-12—Sci Fi Summer Con, Box 957203, Duluth GA 30095. [sfscon.tripod.com](http://sfscon.tripod.com). Atlanta GA. Media SF and fantasy.
- 10-12—A-Kon. [a-kon.com](http://a-kon.com). Dallas TX. Anime.
- 17-19—EuroCon. [eurocon2011.se](http://eurocon2011.se). Stockholm, Sweden. All-European SF and fantasy convention, held every two years.
- 17-19—DuckCon, Box 4843, Wheaton IL 60619. [duckcon.org](http://duckcon.org). Near Chicago IL. Tamara Pierce. Golden Duck young people's SF awards.
- 22-26—Origins, 280 N. High #230, Columbus OH 43215. 614255-4500. [originsgames.com](http://originsgames.com). Convention Center. Year's big gaming con.
- 23-26—PortCon, 482 Webster Rd. #1, Buxton ME 04093. [portconmaine.com](http://portconmaine.com). Wyndham, South Portland ME. Anime and gaming.
- 24-26—ApolloCon, Box 541822, Houston TX 77254. [apollocon.org](http://apollocon.org). Jeanne Gomoll. SF and fantasy.
- 25—SF Hall of Fame Awards Weekend. [locusmag.com](http://locusmag.com). SF Hall of Fame, Seattle WA. Presentation of Locus Magazine annual awards.
- 30-July 3—ConVergence, 1437 Marshall Ave. #203, St. Paul MN 55104. (651) 647-3487. [convergence-con.org](http://convergence-con.org). Minneapolis MN.

## JULY 2011

- 1-3—ConTata, c/o Kronengold, 48-38 48th St., #3F, Woodside NY 11377. [contata.org](http://contata.org). Parsippany NJ. SF and fantasy folksinging.
- 1-4—WesterCon, c/o SFSFC, Box 61363, Sunnyvale CA 94088. [westercon64.org](http://westercon64.org). Fairmont, San Jose CA. P. McKillip, P. & K. Foglio.
- 8-10—Shore Leave, Box 6809, Towson MD 21285. (410) 701-0669. [shore-leave.com](http://shore-leave.com). Hunt Valley (near Baltimore) MD. Trek, etc.
- 8-10—BaCon, Box 91260, Columbus OH 43209. (614) 860-9737. Matt Sloan. "General geekery, open source software—& BACON!!!"
- 8-11—North American Discworld Con, Box 259411, Madison WI 53725. [nadwcon.org](http://nadwcon.org). Concourse Hotel. Terry Pratchett.
- 9-11—Ancient City Con, c/o Den of Dreams, 805 Oak Arbor Cir., St. Augustine FL 32084. [ancientcitycon.com](http://ancientcitycon.com). Jacksonville FL.
- 14-17—ReaderCon, Box 65, Watertown MA 02471. [readercon.org](http://readercon.org). Marriott, Burlington (Boston) MA. Geoff Ryman, Gardner Dozois.

## AUGUST 2011

- 17-21—RenoVation, Box 13278, Portland OR 97213. [renovationsforg](http://renovationsforg). Reno NV. Asher, C. Brown (I. M.), Powers. WorldCon. \$180+.

## AUGUST 2012

- 30-Sep. 3—Chicon 7, Box 13, Skokie IL 60076. [chicon.org](http://chicon.org). Chicago IL. Resnick, Morrill, Musgrave, Scatzi. WorldCon. \$155.

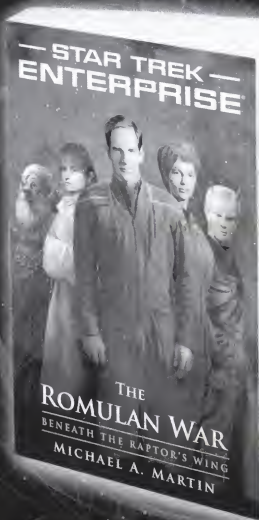
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